APEX MAGAZINE

ISSUE 58

MARCH 2014

EDITED BY SIGRID ELLIS COVER ART BY JULIE DILLON

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Resolute: Notes from the Editor–in–Chief

Angels fall. Humans fall. We fall in love. We fly, and we fall, and sometimes we can't tell the difference.

This month Apex brings you tales of flight, tales of plummeting, and tales of infinite chances. In many ways this month is a month of fresh starts and do–overs. It is March, after all, and in much of the world March is a month of change. The seasons change in all the hemispheres, the light balances and tips and shifts over the entire world.

March is a month of indefinites, of either–or, of it–could–go–both–ways. March is a threshold. It's the edge of the precipice. We rise and soar, or we plummet.

This month, Sunny Moraine gives us "To Increase His Wondrous Greatnesse More," a tale of a girl and her dragon and the choices such an arrangement offers. Cat Hellisen's "Waking" presents a view of angels that compels the reader to the story's end. "Undone," by Mari Ness, gives a parallax view of a popular fairy tale. And Claire Humphrey's "The End of the World in Five Dates" is a quiet and personal examination of a Cassandra's gift of foretelling — what risks do we take when we know what will happen?

This month our non–fiction selection is "Invisible Bisexuality In Torchwood," by K. Tempest Bradford. Our cover, "Ariadne," is by Julie Dillon. Mari Ness's "Waking" is our podcast, read by Windy Bowlsby. Maggie Slater interviews Claire Humphrey, and Loraine Sammy interviews artist Julie Dillon.

Elise Matthesen has two poems for us this March. "Tempus," by J.J. Hunter mixes the divine with the prosaic. Ada Hoffman's "The Parable of the Supervillain" presents a view of human relations I, personally, have never pondered in this light.

For subscribers only we have two features this month. The first section of J.M. McDermott's *MAZE* will be available to those who subscribe to *Apex Magazine*. In addition, subscriptions will contain a reprint of Jacqueline Carey's story, "Actaeon."

I don't know what your experience of the world is, Dear Reader, but I, personally, relate to the stories in this issue. From week to week I think I know what is happening, I think I know where I am going. Sometimes I

am right. Sometimes I am wrong. Sometimes I am right and everything is a mess anyway. Sometimes I am gloriously, delightfully wrong, and what I thought was falling turns into flight and I find myself soaring out of the old and into the new.

Throughout this issue we meet characters in transition, in motion, hurtling through threshold moments. Some of them are falling. Some are flying.

Sigrid Ellis
Editor–in–Chief

Waking

Cat Hellisen

The Museum of Angelic Artefacts was a road–side attraction; a blip on the map where families stopped to stretch their legs and maybe take in an old film of the visitations. They would round out their break with a trip to the shops to buy coffee and ice cream, a postcard to put in a drawer and forget.

It wasn't a big museum, as these things go. Most of the display was of small mechanical pieces; cogs and electrodes and bits of broken chips. A few whole metal skeletons were in the main display at the back of the house, and they were the pieces that drew the biggest crowds. The bio–parts of the angels were harder to find, although we did possess a small glass–topped trunk with an embalmed hand that was supposed to have come from one of the first angel visitations. Of course, there are fingers of Gabriel in several museums.

The last of the angels' visitations ended before my parents were born. There are news–reels showing the first landings, gritty and sepia and jerkily out of time. The angels were taller than the people clustered around them, but they weren't scary or anything.

They just stood there, blinking. No celestial messages of deliverance, no words from distant stars. After a while, they died. Fell apart. The visitations became so common that scientists identified over five–hundred types, and catalogued them all. We like to catalogue things, even if we don't know why. Order.

We gave them names and ranks. It started as a joke — cherubim and seraphim, Michael and Uriel. The names lost meaning. Hard not to when there are hundreds of Gabriels.

Eventually we stopped caring. An angel would arrive, alone, would stand uselessly still, and finally crumple to its knees with a sad dusty crash.

The labs kept a few alive on life–support for a while, but it didn't really make any sense in the long term. They switched off the last of them, CB #7 1397/168–sph, a few weeks ago. It was about three months before my seventeenth birthday, and I wouldn't even have known about the angel if it hadn't been the kind of thing my parents keep track of for the museum.

They printed out the little article and put it up on the notice board to be ignored along with everything else.

I noticed that display #394 had disappeared because it was my job to Windex all the glass each morning, while Mom ran the office and tried to keep my baby brother's screams from waking the whole neighbourhood, and Dad took the morning deliveries. On weekends we had help in the form of Elliot the Boy Wonder, so named because it was a wonder he came to work, considering how much pot he smoked.

The hand in the display had been very neatly taken — no broken glass or jimmied locks, so I went looking for Camelia.

She wasn't in the back yard where the wreck of a 27–oph stood, like a giant hamster wheel slowly turning to rust.

"Cam?" The back fence, half–hidden behind a scraggly hedgerow of blackjacks and rosemary, had a torn section that Cam could fit through. Me too, if I crawled on my belly and didn't mind getting mud all over my front, and black jacks in my hair. "Cam, you idiot," I said to myself and knelt to peer through the gap. I didn't need to look for clues. Of course she took the hand.

§

My parents moved from the city to Meriphem when I was five, so I don't really remember much of what came before. My sister was one, a fat squalling nightmare, and the car trip was a mash of spilled cold drink gone sticky on the back seat leatherette, my mother's eyes wobbly with tiredness. My father driving with the window open so that cold air sluiced over us, and like a generator powering us further and further away from the city tower blocks; my sister's wail.

They'd left behind their city–jobs and bought a house filled with junk, with the tiny parts and empty corpses of angels. And they'd turned it into a business. There was a museum and little tea shop and curio shop where visitors could buy paintings of angels that looked nothing like real ones.

§

I should have told Mom and Dad when we found our angel. But that would have meant explaining what we were doing out in the little forest that edged the town, instead of being at school. Cam was twelve, so I guess she could have maybe cried her way out of it, but at sixteen I wouldn't have had an excuse, and everyone said the second–last year of school was actually the most important and if you failed that your life might as well be over.

Mine already was, as far as I could see it. My parents had been saddled with the late miracle of Ivan, Cam was making a name for herself as some kind of violin prodigy, and I was doing nothing more exciting that getting mediocre grades and cleaning glass cases in a house full of dead angels.

"Cam?" I called again as I crashed through the little narrow deer trails that spread through the forest like veins and arteries through a sweltering heart. I found her exactly where I'd expected, sitting cross–legged in front of the angel.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. The hand was laid out on a maroon velvet cloth in front of her; an offering to the silent remains of an enigma. "Mom and Dad will kill you when they see that."

Cam's head turned like it was on a wire and she stared at me in that slow unblinking way she had when she was thinking deeply about something. "They won't actually kill me," she said eventually.

"It's an expression." I sidled closer and glanced at the angel. It looked the same as it did the day before. And the day before that and the day before that. I don't know why we kept coming back. It was about a head shorter than me and it wasn't new or anything, or alive. It just *was*. "Why did you bring it the hand?"

She shrugged. This wasn't the first time Cam had brought it a gift. Only last week she'd carried her violin case all the way here to play for the angel. She'd kept to the more uplifting pieces. But she'd never brought it an actual physical offering before. The hand was a new development. "It doesn't have one of its own."

The angel didn't have much of its own, to be honest. The parts of it that hadn't rotted away had been exposed to air for too long, and the metal had turned a strange unearthly blue. The trunk was still solid, and the

mechanised joints of its base skeleton were still there. The feet and arms and head were gone, along with any skin it might once have had.

“It’s dead.” I touched her shoulder. “Come on, Cam, put the hand back before anyone notices. Leave the angel.”

“It needs a hand.” She shook her head, the dark curls streaming like they were caught in a storm. But she clambered to her feet. “It asked me for one.”

My back prickled with sweat, and I pulled the front of my tee–shirt away from my chest. “Angels don’t talk, they never have.”

“This one does.” Cam folded the hand in its velvety shroud and followed me back to the museum.

§

Weekends we were supposed to help out at the museum, or if we couldn’t do that, at least help Mom with Ivan so she could have a break from his incessant screeching.

“I hate him,” Cam said, and glared at the demon lying in the pram, his fists and face scrunched up like paper full of angry words.

“You don’t hate him,” I told her in a flat voice, and jiggled the pram a little harder as we walked together down the road. A few joggers and parents out with their kids gave me disapproving stares. “Hate is a very strong word.” I thought about all the things I was supposed to feel, and how I didn’t really understand them. I didn’t hate Ivan, but I didn’t love him either. He was just an annoyance. I didn’t have a passion for music like Cam did. I didn’t even feel much about the knowledge that Elliot the Boy Wonder like–liked me, beyond thinking it weird.

Ivan paused in his screaming, probably to psych himself up for another round.

“You don’t know what I feel,” Cam said. “And I am a very strong person. And strong people have space only for the strongest emotions. Like hate.”

“Or love,” I countered, before glancing over at her. “Anyway, you were just as bad.” My blurry memories of my childhood always came back to

me wrapped in cobwebs like forgotten presents. Maybe that's why I never really felt much of anything.

Cam snapped out of her frown, her face flowering curious. "Was I? How did you manage not to murder me?"

"I almost did," I said. It was a strange confession to make, I hadn't thought about that night in years, but Ivan's screams had brought it back to me with an unusual clarity. It made me uncomfortable to remember. I'd felt too much. "You'd actually stopped crying for a bit, but it didn't matter because you'd kept me awake all night anyway."

"How old was I?"

From the depths of the pram, Ivan's wail began, slowly growing in intensity like an air raid siren. I raised my voice. "Two, I think? You must have been, you were still in your cot, but you weren't in Mom and Dad's room." The edges of that night were knife–blue, slicing up through the fog I lived in.

"What happened?"

Instead of facing her, I bent over the handrail of the pram as if I were checking Ivan. I remember doing the same thing that night. Standing on tip–toe in my teddy–bear nightie, my legs needle–cold, toes numb. The wooden rail of the cot digging into my stomach. Camelia sleeping. Not pudgy and content — that was never her way. She was thin and strange even then, and I thought *oh it would take nothing now to make you stay quiet like this forever*. I even took the yellow blanket that she'd kicked off, and folded it over and over and pressed it down over her face.

She would have died quietly. Maybe my parents wouldn't have had another child. No whine of Cam's violin when she practised a new piece, no screeching from Ivan as he shared his constant rage at the world. Passion was loud. It deafened everyone else in the world, pushed them under.

"Nothing," I said, and skated Ivan's pram faster down the sidewalk. "Obviously. So if I could live though the horror of you, you can live through the horror of Ivan. Fair's fair."

§

That week I went to the angel on my own every day after school. Mom and Dad had signed Cam up for a slew of extra violin lessons. While she had a middle–aged gentleman watching her with bleary eyes to make sure she stood exactly so, and played exactly such, I met with the angel.

The little glade it was in always seemed more peaceful than the rest of the town, even more peaceful than the surrounding forest. The sounds of the birds and rabbits became distant, as easily forgotten as the far–away drone of the highway. It was an oasis of quiet. I would take off my regulation socks and shoes, use my regulation school blazer to sit on, and work on my regulation studies. There was a sweet and simple rightness to it.

No screaming, no tourists, no child–genius little sister, no Elliot the Boy Wonder trying to stare at my tits between tours, no interruptions. I would get a lot more studying done in those two hours a day than I would manage the rest of the entire week.

On Wednesday I discovered that Cam and I were not the only ones who knew about the angel. I stepped into the glade, already smiling at how calm the place was, and stopped. Sunlight fell in soft threads through the leaf canopy, highlighting the damaged struts, the toxic blue of the eroding metal.

Someone had left a plastic bag in front of the angel. The bag stank sweetly, and a few lazy fat greenbottles crawled over and into the plastic crevasses, their buzzing amplified. It sounded like a million tiny aeroplane engines trapped in a cold drink can.

“Ugh.” Trying to touch the entire thing as little as possible, I managed to untie the packet. Inside was half a sheep’s head and two jointed pig’s trotters, both still in their cling–wrap, with the price on. Cheap meat cuts from the butcher’s. Gagging, I tied the bag closed and hunted around for a place where the ground was soft enough to bury it.

I had to dig the hole with a broken branch, and I moved the bag by using the same stick to catch the loops and carry it. The meat made a solid dead sound, and the patter of soil after was like the rain falling on newly–planted seeds. The flies dispersed, taking their unwelcome hum away, back out into the world.

With the offering buried, I didn’t want to stay. After all, what kind of weirdo brings body parts to a dead angel? Besides my sister. There was no way it could have been her. She was still in school, a prisoner.

But what if it was her? She'd brought it the hand, she said it spoke to her. I needed to make sure.

So I stayed, half–focusing on my studies, half–watching the leaves and branches wavering around me, the sun haloing everything in gold dust. But no–one came, and evening fell in long feathery shadows that painted the husk of the angel in alternating deep indigos and flame oranges

Wings

I thought as I left.

I need wings.

§

That evening over the screaming and the blare of the news, I tried to ask Cam about the sheep's head and the pig trotters, but my tongue swelled up and stuck to the roof of my mouth.

All night I dreamt of flying.

§

By breakfast time my tongue had gone back to normal, and while Mom walked Ivan round in desperate little circles, and we ate our corn flakes, I asked Cam about the offerings.

My mother's heels tack–tack–tacked across the floor. A rubbish truck reversed up our road, beeping incessantly. Ivan grumbled, a low constant growl that was his sleepy precursor to his all–day screaming sessions.

"There were weird things out by the clearing," I said, keeping my voice soft enough to not compete with the rest of the noise.

"Weird things?" Cam raised an eyebrow, then shovelled another spoonful of yellow flakes and sugary milk into her mouth. The crunch was enough to drive me insane.

"Yeah. Meat. In a packet."

The bovine chewing continued for a while. Ivan began to whimper. My mother said; "Ssh, ssh, ssh," and jiggled him like a noxious water balloon she was afraid of bursting. It was starting. The whimper grew louder,

higher–pitched, the sound driving into our eardrums like diamond–tipped drills.

Cam stared at me before finally swallowing. “They weren’t mine,” she said in a low whisper. She needn’t have bothered. It’s not like Mom would be able to hear us over the shrieking. “Someone else must be able to hear it talking.”

“It doesn’t talk. It’s a lump of rusting metal.” If angels had ever tried to speak to us before, perhaps it was through their silences, and we — stupid loud buzzing things — had simply not understood. There were texts that said the true voices of angels were terrible to hear. Maybe humanity was simply scared of facing a quiet world, a terrible silence. So instead of listening to the nothings of angels, we jabbered at them, prodded them, filmed them, attached them to clanking, wheezing machines.

No wonder they died.

We hadn’t taken the time to listen.

I left school after first period, faking menstrual cramps, and went to the clearing, back to Cam’s angel. No–one at school would even notice I was gone.

Whoever had brought the previous offering had come again, sometime between nightfall and late morning. An adult? Maybe. There was a new offering now — a stuffed toy cat, one of those hyper–realistic ones that cost too much money. It was brown, the tail tipped with a black tuft like a paint brush. Not a house–cat, but a lioness. The secret visitor had placed the stuffed lioness on one of the prongs that jabbed out from the top of the angel’s body.

I touched the plush fur, stroking it gently, running my fingers from nose tip to tail tip. A soothing moment.

“This is mental,” I said to the angel.

Wings it said back to me.

“Keep quiet.”

It hadn’t spoken. There was no head, no mouth, it was a piece of abandoned machinery. For all we knew it had never even been an angel in the first place. I was tired. I was tired.

Before I left, I put the piece of Angus steak I’d shoplifted in front of it.

§

“We should show Ivan the angel,” Cam said. It was Saturday. We’d been handed the Terror so Mom could go help Dad with the museum.

Elliot was apparently sick, but I’d seen him last night when Dad and I had gone to get take–outs. He’d been half–drunk already, standing with a group of friends, all of them dressed in those fake angel wings you could buy for kid’s parties. Elliot’s eyes had been rimmed with black, his mouth painted. They’d raised their Styrofoam cups when we drove past and cheered, and I’d tried to sink as low in my seat as possible while balancing four milkshakes on my lap. I still managed to get strawberry pink drips all down my leg.

“No.” I was pretending Ivan was an aeroplane. It was one of the few activities that kept him quiet for any length of time. It was also very tiring. “Wheee! Flying! Ivan’s flying!”

“Why not?”

Because I didn’t want to see if other people had found my angel, if there were more packets of meat or stuffed toys or whatever people had decided to bring it in offering. Because I didn’t want it to see Ivan, and I didn’t want to hear what it wanted next. “Because I’m not going crawling through the woods with a one–year–old.” I made him balance on his little socked feet. “Walk!”

He stumbled eagerly along, my hands under his armpits. Then he laughed.

It was so unexpected that neither Cam nor I could say anything for a moment, we just stared at each other blankly, as if we couldn’t understand the sound he’d made.

“He’d like the angel,” Cam said, just as Ivan gave up on his experimental laugh and launched into another full–bellowed roar.

§

Ivan screamed all that night, and we took turns with him. Mom rocked him, Cam played him lullabies on her violin, a sweet tragic sob. Dad drove him around the block a few times, and the momentary stillness was a balm

laid across the entire house. We could all of us breathe easily until his return.

When I held Ivan, his fat bottom cradled on my arm, his fists in my hair, his breathless, hiccoughing mouth right by my ear, I remembered wanting to snuff Cam out. That long ago moment where I'd almost silenced her forever. I never felt like that with Ivan. I wanted to give him a voice, instead. If he could tell us what he wanted, if he could fly, maybe then he'd stop screaming.

"What do you want?" I asked him softly, but it was lost under a wail, the heat of his breath against my cheek, his tears damp on his sticky face, pressed against mine. "What do you want?" I asked but there was no–one to hear me but the dessicated dusty remains of a thousand angels.

Ivan had another doctor's appointment on Monday. Maybe this one would find the switch, would work out what was wrong and give us a simple answer. Maybe Ivan felt too much where I felt too little. Perhaps there was a machine that could drain off the excess, feed his passion into me like a transfusion.

That night when Ivan finally cried himself to sleep, I dreamt of flying and laughing, and I woke to find myself in the clearing before the angel. It was painted by moonlight and shadow, in every shade of blue and silver. Tied together with strands of hair from Cam's violin bow were three sparrows. They were still alive, fluttering and chirring in terror. The flaxen horsehair was knotted around a spur of metal, keeping the little russet sparrows captive.

I stood barefoot in the dew–wet clearing, moon–annointed, and snapped the hairs strand by strand, while the sparrows beat at me with their little wings, pecked and clawed.

One died. The other two flew off into the night, and I dreamed my way back home.

A voice, said the voiceless angel.

§

While Mom was at church and the rest of our family enjoyed our atheism by reading or sleeping, Ivan went missing. It might not have been

a holy day, but it was the only day the angel museum was closed, so it was pretty sacred to the rest of us.

I'd been studying, which actually meant I'd being lying on my bed with my textbook draped over my face. I woke only because the house was so eerily quiet that I heard the bells ringing. I was exhausted from another night full of Ivan's keening, strange dreams, of swollen silence, beating wings and the smell of wet earth.

"Alissa." My dad's voice, sleep–addled and sick. He always sounded sick, thanks to Ivan. Ivan who never stopped screaming, even though phalanxes of doctors had told my parents that there was nothing physically wrong with him.

"Mmm?" I sat up, the text book falling to my lap with a heavy thump. "I was studying —"

"Do you know where your sister and Ivan are?"

Terror iced over me, freezing my joints stiff. "No." I made myself swallow, stand, set my biology textbook on my little study desk. Normal things. "She must have taken him for a walk."

"You think so?" He was frowning. His shirt and face were rumpled, like he'd been taken out of the laundry and left to wrinkle. "Maybe. I didn't hear her leave."

"I'll find them." I dug my slops out of my cupboard and tried to smile. "Don't worry."

I took the short cut; through the museum and under the back fence. I'd stopped only to check the case for #394, and as expected, the Gabriel Hand was also gone. I ran most of the way to the angel's clearing, my heart thudding in my ears, driving me on. There was no screaming, the forest was heavy and dense, the sounds swallowed up and muffled.

I found them in the clearing, Cam on her knees, feet tucked neatly under, sun brown heels bare. Elliot was leaning against one of the trees, smiling beatifically, drunkenly. He had a bottle of whiskey cradled in his lap. The previous night's make–up had been rubbed off, but around his eyes there were still smudges of black. He looked like a fallen angel in one of the paintings. Not like a real angel. The clearing smelled sweet and heavy; frankincense, myrrh, and marijuana.

"Hey, Alissa." Elliot raised his bottle in greeting, rich gold liquid sloshing around. It was more than half–gone. "Welcome to the wake. A wake. Awake. We're waking the angel."

“Ivan?” My breath came short and sharp, I could barely say his name. My heart clamoured and seized, screamed and filled with silence.

The clearing hummed, but my own breath was caught in my lungs and I couldn’t force it out. I remembered the yellow blanket, the silence. How Cam grew up, and I didn’t. Not inside, where it mattered. How Cam could feel things and all I had was the emptiness. How Ivan could fill the world with himself, and I drifted through the universe doing nothing but polishing glass and dreaming.

“Where is he?” I asked, just before I spotted him, small and terribly silent. His legs were wedged inside the body of the angel. Ivan stared at me, eyes wide, contemplative. Elliot’s angel wings had been slipped over his arms. They were crumpled and dirty, and one of the feathers stuck out at an awkward angle.

“He’s fine,” said Cam. “Give him another anchovy. He likes those.” She raised herself, and leaned forward, still on her knees, with something small and dark between her fingers. A tin of anchovies sat on the ground below her. Her violin case was next to it, unzipped and opened, the maple shiny bright against blue velvet.

“What the hell is going on?”

Cam popped a sliver of tiny fish in Ivan’s mouth. He ate it silently. That was not Ivan, screaming, red–faced Ivan.

“You should know,” said Elliot. “You brought us here.”

I looked down at the ground in front of the angel. The Ivan. There were the remains of one of the sparrows, the steak. Someone had dug out the packet with the sheep’s head and the pig trotters and unwrapped them and set them out neatly. There was the toy lioness, Gabriel’s Hand. A box of complimentary matches from the Museum of Angelic Artefacts.

“Thank you,” said the Ivan. The voice was soft and adult. “For listening.” It fluttered its party–wings experimentally, then, with a sound like tearing spider silk, it moved one articulated arm out to me. The sun glinted off the blue of the eroded metal, and outside the forest the bells called soft.

Photo by: Thomas and Nerine Dorman

Cat Hellisen lives in Cape Town, South Africa, and writes stories that smell of iodine and dead fish. She's the author of the fantasy novels *When the Sea is Rising Red*, and *House of Sand and Secrets*.

Undone

Mari Ness

They have done everything they can to hide the arm. One of the finest needlewomen in the court created an elaborate sling, decorated with jewels and feathers, with the pattern of a swan fleeing a rainbow to chase a radiant moon. The jewels make the sling heavier than his arm, and the feathers — peacock for the rainbow, an egret feather trailing from the moon — make him sneeze. Everyone laughs incredulously as he says this between sneezes, although the needlewoman stitched him a fine handkerchief, embroidered with little swans, that he can place against his nose at need. When she is not watching, he uses a small brown piece of fabric instead.

Another woman — a duchess of something or other — presented him, with a flourish, a magnificent cloak, large and heavy enough to conceal both arms. It is stitched with blue and silver thread — more than once he finds himself baffled by just how much decoration these courtiers deem necessary for survival — and like the sling, is itchy and heavy. But it is warm, something he appreciates in the cold months. His brother–in–law may be a king, but he is a king with an eye for certain economies. Even in the depths of winter, the fires in the castle burn low if they burn at all.

In the summer, they attach feathers to his other arm, and dress the rest of him in delicate white silk dripping with pearls, to draw the eye away, they explain. His arms remain heavy by his side, even as the feathers shift beneath the summer winds.

He spends a lot of time drinking, from glasses etched with feathers.

He needs, everyone agrees, some sort of employment. But figuring out what a one armed man with little education or skills, who has spent six years of his life as a bird, can usefully *do* has proven difficult indeed. Soldiering is out, and as a human, his eyesight is too poor to allow him to work as a lookout or a guard. He could be a courier, but he never learned to ride a horse, and the horses seem somehow wary of the swan arm. Even without the problem of his arm, as the brother of a queen, any form of menial labor is out. One of the clerks is kindly working with him to improve his handwriting — he was left handed before the *accident*, as everyone is now calling it, as if giving it a new, mistaken name will somehow help, and now must work with the right hand. Perhaps he can

eventually become a private secretary to one of the lords, or even the king. An honorable enough profession. Or be given some administrative post. High ranking, of course — *the queen's brother* — and he has no real experience, but perhaps — Can he draw? No? Write poetry? Speak another language? They know of a duke in another country who does translations and writes poetry and is by all accounts one of the happiest men in the world. Most fitting. But the handwriting, and the feathers — Ah. Can he sing — no, no he cannot. Ah, they have it: he can be in charge of the queen's entertainment, ensure that she has all the jugglers and musicians she requires, with clowns and contortionists to amuse her two little ones.

He cannot even look at the queen.

After everything she did for us, his fourth brother tells him.

For you, he thinks. Not for me.

His sister says nothing at all, but no longer looks him in the eyes. Is she angry at his lack of gratitude? Guilty that all of the shirts she used to transform them back into boys and men, his was the only shirt unfinished, the only shirt missing a sleeve?

Why? he might have asked her. *Why was my shirt left undone? Was it to spend more nights with the king? I know the way you could hardly leave his side when you first came, the way that your trips to the wood to gather nettles slowly dwindled, until you gathered them but once a week, then once a month, then less than that. Was it to save your hands? Your feet? Was it because I once punched you when you were a little girl because you had taken something I wanted?*

He could talk to her. He should talk to her.

A feather falls from his wrist.

He heads down to the dungeons and says a few words to the guards. He is the queen's brother, and they relent.

She sits in one corner, one leg tucked beneath her, mouth bound against uttering more curses, arms and legs heavy with chains.

With his right hand — why, *why* had the shirt not fallen on the other arm — he tugs off the heavy sling. It falls to the floor in a heavy clanging of jewels. He stretches out both arms to his stepmother.

"Curse me again," he says. "Curse me again, too tightly for nettles to break."

Her mouth is bound against uttering more curses, but her eyes gleam.

"Curse me again, and I will set you free."

It might be his imagination, but he thinks her chains shimmer as he steps forward, to free her while he still has a human hand.

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The Book of Apex: Volume 4 of Apex Magazine
edited by Lynne M. Thomas

The Book of Apex Volume 4 collects the original fiction from Hugo–winning editor Lynne M. Thomas's first fifteen issues at the helm of *Apex Magazine*, which included two Hugo Award nominations for the magazine.

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To Increase His Wondrous Greatnesse More

Sunny Moraine

The maiden and the dragon met on the night of the new moon, when the darkness would be deepest and the virtuous would be inside and afraid. They met on a high moor, lonely enough to be suitable for the conference, and the wind howled and cried and pulled at the maiden's long cornsilk hair as if it were the soul of a badly neglected child.

The dragon twisted herself into a form to match that of the maiden's, out of courtesy, for ancient things are always well-mannered. She was tall and slender and she bent like a tree when the maiden came near. When she parted her lips to speak, the inside of her throat glowed like coals. Her red eyes smoked gently. She was very beautiful when it suited her to be so, and very terrible always, and when she wished to be at her most terrible beauty was the means she chose. But the maiden wasn't afraid.

The maiden dropped into a crouch and produced a silver knife from her skirts, slashed a line down the inside of her arm. Blood welled; in the starlight it was like flowers blooming in the snow. The dragon licked her lips.

The maiden dipped two fingers into her own blood and drew a circle on the ground to contain herself. At the place of each of the four corners of the world she placed a rune, the name of which cannot be spoken aloud unless the speaker is willing to spill a great deal more blood than can be drawn from a cut on the arm.

"Now," said the maiden to the dragon, "we can talk."

§

The maiden was born beautiful, grew up beautiful, and only became more beautiful as she reached the age of womanhood. When her mother and father died she lived alone, since she cared for no one's company. But when she walked among the villagers she heard them say that someone should finish the job she had started, find a tower and lock her in it.

She cut her cornsilk hair short with a silver knife by the light of a waning gibbous moon and burned it in a patch of bare, dead earth, salting the ashes when she was done. She perceived the webwork of a story weaving itself around her, closing around her throat like a silken noose. You must understand that this was before she knew that stories were their own kind of magic. And like all forms of magic, they are subject to manipulation.

§

High in her tower, the maiden sat at a window and watched the procession as it made its way through the town and up toward the rocky foothills — up toward the dragon's cave. She sat behind thick curtains and peered through the gap between them. It wouldn't do for a hostage to be seen moving about free.

The procession of knights was glorious to see. They were all tall men, strong, some handsome and some not but all supposedly loyal and gallant and chivalrous and all the things that knights were supposed to be. Their armor and lances shone. The glossy hides of their horses shone as well. They were a line of gleaming jewels in motion, marching bravely to death.

Some of them, she knew. Some of them had fought to win her, and then fought the maiden herself. She was weary of them, all of them, and she knew that she must be weary of them to grant the final victory of the final knight additional weight and significance. Or so it would supposedly be. So she had known for so long, again and again.

But the maiden now understood that knowing was not stone. And she wasn't weary of fighting. She licked her lips and thought of the dragon's forked tongue.

§

"It must be blood," the maiden said, lifting her voice to be heard over the sighing wind. "Haven't you had enough of all of this? Well, then. But there will have to be blood. Lots of it."

The dragon looked dubious. She was pacing slowly around the outside of the circle, her long fingers twitching in the dark as though they ached to close around something, to dig in, to rend and tear. “I spill as much as I need to eat,” she said, and it was like the distant murmur of thunder. “This is inviting death. Are you saying I will have to die?”

“I am saying we may both need to pretend,” said the maiden. Under her white gown she wore a belt of bones. Not all of them were of animals. She had never let anyone see it and never intended to, though she had an idea that some suspected it was there. “I will have to pretend to be rescued. Please understand how embarrassing that is for me.”

“Death is more than embarrassment, child.” The dragon stopped her pacing and faced the maiden squarely. She shifted her shoulders, and in the gloom great black things like sails unfurled and cut through the wind. “Tell me how this proposal is fair.”

“If neither of us truly dies,” the maiden said, “it seems to me to be very fair.” She reached beneath her skirts and produced the bones, shook them in a slow circle. They clicked softly. The wind moaned when it saw them. “You need fear and flesh. I need blood and freedom. We have a common enemy. Let us reason together.”

In the long silence that followed, the maiden lowered her still-bleeding arm and smudged a break in the circle. At some point the dragon stepped through the break and took the maiden’s arm in her claws and licked the blood off her skin. The maiden smiled and touched her mouth to the cool armor of the dragon’s throat. The wind turned away and screamed.

§

“They’re already telling,” said the maiden, turning her head in the dragon’s lap. The dragon was carding her long emerald claws through the maiden’s hair and it was dangerously close to putting them both to sleep, but the maiden was thinking. There was more to do. The picture wasn’t yet complete.

“You have heard this?”

“In the village. Beyond. It draws more of them in.” The maiden closed her eyes and thought of them, that parade of jewels coming from all four

corners, invisibly runed and bound in her blood circle. Her blood — their blood. They had so much more than her and now it wasn't exactly as though they needed it anymore.

And really, wasn't she only giving them what they wanted?

The dragon sighed. Flame licked the air. "So I will have more work."

"But then you'll feel stronger." The maiden opened her eyes again and stared up at the dark, sloping ceiling of the cave. It was full of whispers and falling water. She had never felt as at home anywhere else. "And then, when I'm ready to change everything, you'll have no more to do."

"When?"

The maiden kissed the dragon's emerald claws, one at a time. One at a time she pulled them past her teeth and let them cut her mouth until blood stained her lips crimson. "Soon."

§

"They are like cattle," said the dragon. She sat in a corner of her cave on a pile of bloodstained rugs, nursing a small wound on her thigh. The maiden looked up from where she was bending over a tangle of knightly viscera, separating the various organs into piles of the useful and the discarded.

"You slaughter them as such."

"I don't understand why they still keep coming." The dragon stretched her wounded leg, her wings wrapped around her like a cloak of starry night, and winced. She was tiring, the maiden saw. But there was much more blood needed. "I pile their skulls by the entrance. I pave the pathway with their bones. To reach me they must pass through a forest of femurs and empty armor and it only seems to encourage them."

"They come," said the maiden, "because they must." She turned to the rack toward the back of the cave and began to string intestines over it, stretching them tight as cords. "But they do not understand how it feeds me. Once I did not understand myself. They have an outdated idea of how this all works. The more of them come, the stronger I am. A few more and it will be ended."

The dragon reached down and picked up a severed head, regarding it with faint melancholy. Its eyes were half closed and its tongue protruded. Its beard was matted with gore.

The maiden wondered if it might be advisable to put it on a stake at the base of the hill.

“I am making myself a monster,” said the dragon. When she moved her wings the shifted air played with the obsidian and jasper tangles of her hair. The maiden watched this play of spun gemstone, rose to her feet and went to the dragon. Her fingers left bloody streaks down gleaming scales. Her mouth left the dragon’s lips swollen and hungry.

“We were both already monsters,” whispered the maiden. She bent and kissed the smear of steaming blood that smeared the dragon’s thigh and it burned ancient and nameless patterns into her tongue and throat. “And we did not make ourselves so. Now they will all merely know what we are. Now we only take control of the making.”

She had vats of the blood of chivalry, tapestries of gut, towers of bone. She had no real plans for any of them, but they all made excellent props.

§

“Tonight,” said the maiden. She knelt between the dragon’s knees and the dragon cradled her glowing head in her claws. Understanding passed between them like breath. The dragon was bare-breasted, and when she let her wings hang free this way the maiden was almost sure that she could see the dragon’s heart beating inside her scaled chest like a little pulsing sun.

“Neither of us will die?” asked the dragon. Behind her red eyes there was something a bit like fear. The maiden shook her head.

“Neither. And both.” She smiled. “Nine tenths of magic is misdirection.”

§

The last knight came riding up the path of bone, through the forest of femurs and empty armor. It was sunset and the light caught the point of his lance and made it look as though it were already bloody. He was the largest, the strongest, the most courageous, of course here to ride to victory where everyone else had failed, and as she watched him approach the maiden knew that he was the one she had been waiting for.

The dragon burst out to meet him with all her beauty stripped away, all massive beating wings and tongues of flame, and there was barely the span of a breath before the knight drove his gleaming lance into the dragon's beating sun of a heart, piercing its armor and spilling its steaming blood into the dust where the blood of so many gallant knights had been spilled in its turn. The dragon fell dead, still twitching, and the maiden came running from the cave, at last free, crying with joy and throwing herself into the knight's strong arms.

And there was living, happily and ever after.

§

The last knight came riding up the path of bone, through the forest of femurs and empty armor. It was sunset and the light caught the point of his lance and made it look as though it were already bloody. He was the largest, the strongest, the most courageous, of course here to ride to victory where everyone else had failed, and as she watched him approach the maiden knew that he was the one she had been waiting for.

And her joy turned to ashes in her mouth as the dragon burst out of the cave's entrance, already in flight, beating the knight's steed into the ground with its dark clouds of wings. The knight tried to raise his lance but it was already too late, and he died burning and bitten in half as the dragon threw back its head and roared its victory.

The maiden turned away and wept.

§

The last knight came riding up the path of bone, through the forest of femurs and empty armor. It was sundown and the light caught the point of his lance and made it look as though it were already bloody. He was the largest, the strongest, the most courageous, of course here to ride to victory where everyone else had failed, and as she watched him approach the maiden knew that he was the one she had been waiting for.

The knight stopped on the patch of flat, gore-matted ground by the entrance to the dragon's cave, raised his lance high and gave one great, deep cry of challenge. No words. No *come out and face me, beast,* or *I have come to take back the treasure you have stolen* — meaning the maiden, of course.

The ones who said things like that, she had asked the dragon to kill especially slowly.

But the dragon didn't stir. And from her hiding place in a pile of boulders by the entrance, the maiden stepped out into the dusk and faced the knight.

The knight said nothing for a moment. The maiden said nothing as well. They stared at each other in silence and the last of the sun touched the horizon and deepened the shadows to the obsidian and jasper of the dragon's hair.

At last the knight said, "You are the maiden."

The maiden nodded. "That is what I am." She lifted a graceful hand. "Lift me onto your horse, then, and carry me away from here to make me your wife."

The knight looked from her to the cave's entrance, doubtful. "I came to slay the dragon."

"I thought you came to rescue me."

"I —" The knight faltered. "I thought both would be required."

"They aren't." The maiden closed her eyes briefly, thought of this picture as seen from far away and high above, and a gentler and less angry wind came and toyed with her cornsilk hair, arranging it in delicately attractive waves. "Lift me up and take me away from here."

No blood, whispered the wind. *No blood.*

Except that the blood of the dragon was burned into her tongue and throat and it burned still.

Still doubtful, the knight extended his hand, leaned down and reached for the maiden. The maiden took his hand at once and swung easily up into

the saddle in front of him, but she swung up facing him instead of facing forward, and if he had not expected this, he certainly did not expect the silver knife that flashed through the dying light and cut into the exposed flesh of his throat. He twitched, jerked, fell forward and the maiden caught him.

She was drenched in blood, in her cornsilk hair and her white gown. She opened her mouth into its flow and let it fill her. From the cave's entrance she heard the roar and smelled the smoke as the dragon belched flames. There were flames in her as well, rising higher and consuming her from the inside out, and she understood that these were the flames in which some of her daughters would burn and she wept for them.

But then she rose into the air, threw back her head and laughed through her tears. The wind howled around her and the moon turned red and bled across the sky. The world was twisting like torn fabric between angry fingers.

There is a point at which every victim tires of being so. There is a point at which every victim perceives the joys of being the villain.

The dragon rose into the air beside her, serpentine, lizard-formed. The maiden settled on her back and twisted the world, gut and flesh and bone, her hands slick with burning blood.

§

The dragon licked the maiden clean of the blood of chivalry. The moon was rising, just past the full. The silver knife caught its light where it lay in the last of the blood, and that light was in turn caught and reddened by the dragon's eyes.

The maiden reflected on the difference between caught light and caused light, and wondered if the difference was a meaningful one. She shivered under the dragon's forked tongue.

"It is done?" rumbled the dragon. Her wings were demurely folded across her shoulders, but the maiden was sure she could still see that glowing heart.

"It is done. We are what we are." She stepped forward, letting her bloodsoaked gown fall around her feet. All she wore was her belt of bone.

Her cornsilk hair was stained a brilliant red, like a fall of garnets. “Everything is true. Nothing is. Everyone knows that the blood of heroes can remake a world, but hardly anyone understands that it can go either way.”

“And we’ll live forever,” mused the dragon.

“Some of us,” said the maiden. Which might come to the same. She curled herself into the fold of the dragon’s wings and felt that fiery heart beat against her own. The vats of blood, the towers of bone — time or the eyes of people could take them. None of it mattered now. Power was immaterial. They could tell what they wanted to tell; they had this one story for themselves, a tiny spark that they could fan into a flame. She leaned up and curved her lips against the dragon’s cruel mouth, and smiled as they rose ever higher.

“Let us be monsters together.”

Sunny Moraine is a humanoid creature of average height, luminosity, and inertial mass. They're also a doctoral candidate in sociology and a writer–like object whose work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Lightspeed*, *Shimmer*, *Clarkesworld*, and *Long Hidden: Speculative Fiction from the Margins of History*, as well as multiple Year's Best anthologies, all of which has provided lovely reasons to avoid a dissertation. Their first novel *Line and Orbit*, co–written with Lisa Soem, is available from Samhain Publishing. Their solo–authored novel *Crowflight* is available from Masque Books. They can be found at sunnymoraine.com.

The End of the World in Five Dates

Claire Humphrey

I: May 21, 2011 (according to Harold Camping)

Robin called it an apartment, but it was really part of an old carpet factory in the Junction: an echoing space where one of the looms used to be, furnished with a broken church pew, two wheelchairs, and the bench seat from a minivan.

The smells of paint and dust were good, banishing the phantom smells of antiseptic and latex gloves from my nose. I leaned in the doorway of the breakroom and watched her sweep. "Where's everyone going to sit?"

"On the floor," she said. "That's why I'm sweeping it."

"And you're cooking dinner on this thing?" I gestured over my shoulder at the twelve–burner gas range; eleven of the burners were clotted with molasses–brown grease and a surcoat of dog hair.

"Petra's bringing food. You'll like Petra."

"No, I won't."

Robin threw the broom down with a clatter, and marched over to the dentist's cabinet in the corner. "Jesus," she said. "You need an attitude adjustment, stat."

She handed me a bottle of Crown Royal, about a third full. I poured some into one of the paint–stained mugs from the work table. The paint didn't come off into the whiskey, so I drank it.

"Now," Robin said, picking up the broom again, and sweeping the pile of dust and filings underneath the work table. "You are going to love Petra. Know why? Because she's extremely fucked up."

"Oh. Great."

"Shut up and drink! She's fucked up and she's my oldest friend, and you can't mess around with her. Be good to her. Got it? Even if you can't be good to yourself."

"It's not about being good to myself, for fuck's sake. If this is confirmed, it means surgery and chemo and all kinds of unpleasant bullshit and there's just no point to it."

"But you don't know for sure! What if you're wrong? If it really is cancer, Cass, you can't just leave it alone —"

"Watch me."

“Cass,” Robin said. “I’m sorry. Let’s talk later, when you’ve had a bit more time to get used to it.”

“Right. Sure.” As if.

“Are you sure you’re okay to stay for dinner? Promise you’ll tell me if you need anything?”

I raised the mug to her, and made a face. My knee hurt, the way it had for ages, but it didn’t hurt enough to warrant anything stronger than drink. It only felt different because I knew what it might be, now.

The bell rang: a great big clanging handbell Robin had mounted outside the factory door. I slugged some more of my whiskey, brushed off Robin’s hand and went to answer.

Petra, first sight: collarbones standing out from a boat–neck sweater, hair cropped in a pixie cut that made her eyes look huge. She had three giant takeout bags from the Tikka House, and a box of red wine.

“Happy Rapture,” she said, and kissed my cheek, although we had never met before.

“I’m Cassandra,” I said to the side of her face as she slipped past me to hug Robin.

Two other women crowded in behind; Robin’s cousin Kate and her ex Laurie. We all lounged around on the bare concrete floor and ate samosas and dipped naan in tarka daal. Everyone handed Petra their cups to be filled with wine from the box.

“To endings,” I said, raising my mug.

Robin frowned at me. I ignored her.

Petra giggled, lifted her plastic tumbler of wine, and tilted it against mine.

Dinner was messy. I got tamarind sauce on my cuff, whiskey on my arm and wine all over the floor beside me. I watched Petra’s lips: the gloss was all licked off and replaced with the shine of ghee and a few crumbs of chickpea flour. She smiled a lot, but in between smiles she looked sad.

When she laughed, her eyes and nose wrinkled up and her upper lip lifted off her teeth, and then she would follow it up with a self–conscious press of hand to mouth. The third time she did it, I touched her wrist and drew her hand back down and set a pakora in it, which made her laugh again.

When everyone was stuffed we piled all the takeout dishes under the table and Robin put Patti Smith on the stereo. I went out for a cigarette.

When I came back in, Petra was just exiting the bathroom. She paused in the doorway and gave me a wide–open look. I crowded her back in and pushed her against the inside of the door and said, “I’ve been wanting to kiss you all night.”

That laugh again, and then she tilted her head back, and so I pressed my lips to hers.

“Is this an end–of–the–world thing?” she said. “Not that I’m complaining.”

“I’ve seen the end,” I said. “This isn’t it.”

A bright purple–white light. Newspaper sheets scattered on the floor, dated 2013. Thunderous noise. Pain in my knee eclipsed, meaningless.

Petra pouted. “Does that mean I’ll have to worry about whether you’ll call me in the morning?”

I paused, hand inside her sweater, other hand at her waist. “Assume I won’t.”

She thought about it for a second, and shrugged. “Still in.”

I laughed against the fine skin of her belly, and I kept her there until I heard Kate or Laurie, outside, counting down to midnight. (“It’s not New Year’s —” “Come on, bubbly is always appropriate —”)

We stumbled out. Laurie was pouring prosecco into all of the remaining paint mugs. I kept hold of Petra’s hand. From the other side of the work table, Robin glared at me, and turned up the volume on “Dancing Barefoot”.

She came around and took Petra’s hand and uncoupled it from my own. “If you’re going to hang out with Cass,” she said, “there’s some stuff I should tell you.”

“No, Robin, shut up,” I said. “It’s not your business, shut up.”

But she led Petra away, and Petra followed, and I stood there against the wall, watching Robin’s mouth form words, watching Petra’s face change as she listened.

II: October 21, 2011 (again according to Harold Camping)

“Cassandra, good to see you,” Petra said, clearly meaning the opposite. She was looking away from me already, at the passing cars on Harbord.

We were taking advantage of one of the last warm evenings of the year on a bistro patio.

“Her name’s not really Cassandra,” Robin said. “Right, Chrissie?”

“Seriously?” said the other woman at the table, my date, Aminata. “Like Chrissie Hynde?”

“Exactly like Chrissie Hynde,” I said, “only without the ‘e’,” and I showed her my driver’s license.

She laughed, wide–open throat. “Why wouldn’t you keep a name like that?”

“Gonna make you, make you, make you notice,” Petra sang, in a nasty whine.

I tilted my chin at her. “That’s why.”

Aminata laughed some more, to get us over the awkward spot. I really liked Aminata. “Why Cassandra, though?” she said.

“The vision thing,” Robin said. “Didn’t she tell you? She sees the future.”

“Only a bit of it,” I said, to the placemat in front of me.

“The worst bit,” Petra said. “And it’s not even true. Prophecies never are.”

“Case in point,” Robin put in, “did you see the news? All the people setting up lawn chairs in Times Square? End times tourists. You’d think they would’ve learned their lesson back in May.”

“It’s like they’re hoping against hope,” Aminata said.

“Well, if they were right, it would mean going to heaven,” I said.

“But they aren’t right,” Petra said. “And now they have to face the facts. They gave up their homes and trashed their lives on this earth and now they’ve got to live in the aftermath.” She slammed her wine glass down on the table so hard the stem cracked and the bell dropped. Wine flooded across the table onto Aminata’s lap.

“Whoa,” Robin said, grabbing for a napkin.

“That’s a Coach,” Aminata said sadly, looking at the dull red stain across her suede bag. She beckoned a waitress, and asked for some club soda.

Petra covered her mouth with her hand and looked away.

I saw blood on her fingers. I pulled at her wrist and made her open her hand so I could press a napkin to the cut.

“I thought you were just mad at me, about the way we left things,” I said, low, only to her. “But there’s something else going on, isn’t there?”

Petra shook her head. “I’m just so sad. I’m so sad, Cass, and I don’t know what to do.”

“Hey,” I said. “Hey.” I stroked her hair, across the table.

“Your date’s leaving,” she said. I looked out and saw Aminata’s stained bag, slung over Aminata’s round shoulder, proceeding away along Harbord, in the last of the sunset.

“She would’ve anyway,” I said. “People mostly do, when they hear about the prophecy thing.”

“That’s not why,” Petra burst out. “Don’t you get it? I don’t give a shit about your prophecy thing! I just didn’t want to watch you let yourself die.” Her eyes overflowed. She hid her face in the bloodied napkin.

“Look, no one knows for sure that it’s cancer. It was just a recommendation for me to follow up. Anyway, there’s no way you’re this sad over me,” I said. “You haven’t even seen me in how long? Get checked for depression. Get some meds, or something.”

“You’re such an asshole,” Petra said. She dropped the napkin on the floor, grabbed her bag and walked out.

Robin and I sat there, empty chairs to either side, table wine–stained and scattered with shards.

“Don’t say it,” I said.

Robin shrugged, and didn’t say it.

III: May 27, 2012 (according to Ronald Weinland)

“It was what you said. You got me thinking.” Petra looked different. I glanced again and again as she spoke. I figured out she’d gained weight, all over, the frail angles replaced by sturdier curves. Her cheeks looked more cheerful, her belly rounded a little over her belt, and I was pretty sure she’d gone up a bra size.

“What I said,” I echoed, trying to remember what we’d been talking about, and when. We were in a Starbucks, in the rear corner; they had Jeff Buckley on the stereo, beneath the noise of the espresso machine.

“I cockblocked your date,” she said, “and you were kind of shitty about it.”

“Oh yeah. Aminata. ’S okay, it wasn’t going anywhere.” I heard the words, I heard my voice, normal and dry, but it seemed like someone else, speaking in another room.

“It never is, with you, right?” Petra said, and laughed, a little sadly. “So, yeah. I went and got checked for depression, and what do you know, I had it. So I got meds. Best thing I’ve done for myself in ages. I figured I’d look you up and say thanks.”

“Um. You’re welcome.”

“Did you just wake up, or something?”

I nodded, sucked at my coffee, heard the liquid whiffle through the opening of the plastic lid.

“Have you eaten? Want a scone to go with that?”

“I could go for a scone.” I couldn’t go for a scone. There was no way I could eat. My mouth still tasted of blood where I’d scored the inside of my cheek with my teeth.

Her phone call had raised me from another one of those dreams: torn pages of the Star scattered on the floor, dated next year; grinding pain in my knee, worse than now. The flash of light, devastating. The avalanche–roar that I thought was the whole city falling.

The day was getting closer. I still hadn’t figured out how to live in its shadow.

I watched her return to the lineup, point to the pastry case, fumble for her wallet. “Hey, Petra,” I said, when she came back to the table. “I’m going to Europe. Want to go with me?”

She raised her eyebrows. “Bucket list? I thought you’d already done Europe.”

I shrugged. “By myself. And there was a lot of stuff I didn’t see.”

“Yeah, well. It is an entire continent.”

I tore a piece off my scone and put it in my mouth. It tasted like ash.

“Every time I go a couple of months without seeing you, I forget what a jackass you can be,” Petra said.

She didn’t look mean while she said it, though. I figured I was growing on her.

“You still haven’t followed up with the doctor yet. Have you?”

I shook my head. My knee didn't really feel any worse than it had since I first went to ask about it. It hurt, and I limped a bit, but I didn't need a cane. I could definitely go on like this for another eight months.

"Bucket list," I reminded her. "It doesn't include spending the Last Days on medical bullshit."

I was expecting her to roll her eyes. But she just looked at me, and sat back a little, her feather earrings swinging against her neck.

"Have you ever had any other visions?" she said.

So I told her about my parents. I'd been right about that one. I'd even told them. And it hadn't made any difference at all.

At the end of the telling, my coffee had gone lukewarm, and the torn edge of the scone had gone dry.

Petra reached across the table. I thought she was going to touch my hand, but she swept up the uneaten scone and crumpled the paper bag around it and dumped it in the nearby garbage.

"That's kind of freaky," she said. "I mean, I'm really sorry for your loss, and I can see why you think the way you do. I'm not a believer. But… You told me to go get checked for depression. You were right about that."

"No. You would've made the same decision anyway," I said. "I don't even know why you listened to me. You were right, I was being a jackass."

"Look," she said. "I don't really want to, but I give a shit about you. I want you to stick around."

"I gave notice on my apartment yesterday."

"So stay with Robin. Stay with me. Whatever. Even if you're right, don't you want to spend your time with the people who give a shit about you?"

I pictured eight months of concerned glances, eight months of printouts about alternative cancer treatments, eight months of scones I didn't want.

"Even if I'm wrong," I said, "it takes kind of a long time to see all of Europe."

IV: December 21, 2012 (according to the Mayan Calendar)

The Prado was full of pictures and the Plaza de Oriente was full of statues and the Palacio Real, I never found out about, because I'd been to

half the capitals of Europe and I was tired of sights and I just sat down at a table in a plaza and asked for wine.

The day was chilly and I was the only person sitting outdoors. A waiter came out with my wine and a plate of pimientos, these little green peppers they fry in olive oil and then sprinkle with salt. I ate them and drank my wine and looked at whatever architecture I could see without turning in my seat.

Another world–ending. At home, Robin would be having a party. She and Petra and Kate and what's–her–name and whoever else. It was good that I wasn't there. No one wanted to hear about the real end of the world.

My knee really fucking hurt. I thought I could feel the swelling of a tumour if I pressed on the right spot, except that made it hurt more, so I didn't do that.

Walking made it hurt more, too. It was kind of getting in the way of completing my bucket list.

When my phone rang I was halfway through my second plate of pimientos — maybe I couldn't figure out the big stuff, but some of those little pleasures were really great, anyway.

"Petra," I said. "Hey. Hey from Spain."

"Happy Apocalypse," she said. "Hope you don't mind me calling. It's kind of a tradition now, you and me and the end of the world."

"I'm coming home," I blurted.

"Yeah?" Her voice lifted happily. Behind it, there was music, something choral and ancient–sounding.

"Yeah," I said, and I pressed my free hand to my eyes to keep them dry in the chilly Spanish wind.

V: January 23, 2013 (according to Chrissie "Cass" Hynd)

I didn't tell Petra it was the day. She woke in a good mood, and I didn't want to spoil it. She went around the apartment humming Neko Case, making me coffee and pancakes, setting out a painkiller beside my plate.

She had something due for a client and she spent the morning on the sofa with her laptop and a headset. I read the paper, every page, even the

classifieds, and when I was done, I folded it up neatly and set it on the coffee table in the centre of Petra's living room.

She'd made up the sofa for me at first, but the last couple of weeks I'd been sleeping in her bed. When I had the nightmare — most nights, now — she would wrap her arms around me without waking.

I killed most of the day like any other day. It was too late to do any more of the stuff on my bucket list. I just wanted to drink some tea, do a crossword, listen to Petra's half of her client call, watch the clouds gather outside.

It happened in the early evening. Petra was in the kitchenette, making a stir–fry; she had a colander full of bean sprouts and a brick of tofu and a mound of green onions chopped fine. I could smell sesame oil.

I was in the living room, with my leg propped up on the sofa and a beer in my hand, just watching rain on the window–glass. Dark had fallen early on an unseasonably warm day.

I heard thunder in the distance, or something else. I rose and stood by the window and took a deep breath. The hairs on my arm pricked to life.

The power went out.

"What the fuck?" Petra said from the kitchen. I heard the clatter of a knife or something falling into the sink.

"No," I said. "No, shit, no." I turned to go to her. In the dark I smashed my bad knee against the coffee table. Pain like a starburst. I heard the table go over.

"Cass? Cass, are you okay?"

And there was the light, a vast electric–purple flare, and there was the sound, a roar like the whole city falling, and beneath it I heard myself cry out.

And Petra laughed, a high surprised whoop. "That was close! Cass, did you see? I think it hit right next door!" She rushed to the window. "Thunderstorms in January — fucking climate change, wow. I can't see any fire, can you? Holy crap. I've never been that close to it before!"

My eyes were dazzled still, tear–filled and blinking. I saw her shape towering dim against the dark outside, against the city without power.

Then the light blinked on, and she was just Petra–sized again, and I was lying on the floor beside the overturned coffee table, amid the scattered sheets of today's paper.

Petra turned and saw me there. She came and helped me up. She hissed through her teeth when she saw my hands uselessly clenching over the bad place on my knee, and she brought me another painkiller.

Then she figured it out. I saw her face change. I must have told her about the light, at some point, or maybe she could see it on me somehow.

"Today was your day," she said. "You didn't tell me."

"There wasn't anything I could do to change it," I said.

"I would have held your hand more," Petra said.

"Hold it now," I said. "Please?"

She came and wrapped her arms around my shoulders and pressed her lips to my hair and whispered into it, "I'm so glad you were wrong."

VI: January 24, 2013

I did not have the dream. I did not dream at all. I woke up with my arm gone to sleep under Petra's weight, and weak sun angling in.

I lay until Petra's alarm went off. It was Thursday. Petra kissed me and rolled over and padded to the shower. She had nothing on. I saw the dimples at the base of her spine, the comfortable weight at her hips, the long muscles of her thighs.

I did not have a job to go to. I did not have a place of my own. I had a backpack and a drawer of clothes in Petra's dresser and a few cartons of books in Robin's garage.

I had a terrible pain in my knee. I had a business card in my wallet.

In the bathroom, Petra turned on the shower and began humming to herself. Her singing voice, I had found, was surprisingly high and sweet.

I pulled on a mostly–clean t–shirt and a pair of flannel boxers, and I went to the living room.

We had left the table overturned, the papers strewn. Yesterday's date on every one of them.

I kicked them into a messy pile with my bare foot, and then grabbed them all up and dumped them into the recycling bin.

That part was easy. The next part needed a bit more. I spent a moment just taking deep breaths.

But Petra wouldn’t be in the shower forever, and I wasn’t sure I wanted an audience for this conversation.

I picked up my phone and I looked at the business card and I dialed the number there.

“Hi, yes. My name’s Chrissie Hynd. I got a referral a while ago and I haven’t followed up, but now I’m — yes, that’s right. I’m supposed to schedule an MRI. Yes, please. For my knee. Yes — yes, that works, I’ll put it my calendar. Thanks.”

When I hung up the phone I felt this pressure behind my eyes, so intense I thought it was a vision coming, and I worked my hands together and hauled in a breath and waited for it.

Nothing came, though. Nothing from outside. Just the slow tick of the engine of logic in my brain, telling me that although the world had not ended, I could still die. And in response, the faster engine of my heart, telling me it would beat, and beat, and beat, and keep beating.

Claire Humphrey lives in Toronto, where she works in the book business, and writes short fiction and novels. Her stories have appeared in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Strange Horizons*, *Interzone*, *Crossed Genres*, *PodCastle*, *Fantasy Magazine* and numerous anthologies including the upcoming *Long Hidden: Speculative Fiction from the Margins of History*. She is also the reviews editor at *Ideomancer*.

Actaeon

Jacqueline Carey

I am running. I am running and it is good, I am running in the dawn–dappled forest and the new air of the day is sharp and good in my lungs.

Listen; the hounds are baying. But not all of them, not all, no. I do not hear Philomel. She is a beauty, my Philomel, my lead bitch; her baying is like the sound of a bell and she is never mistaken.

There, now, the baying falters. It is a cold trail. I let my steps fall slower in the soft loam of the forest's floor. I whistle to the hounds. The morning is still and hot.

I crouch and touch the earth, letting my chest fill and empty with great breaths. My hair hangs before my eyes, dark with sweat. I stand and whistle again for the hounds. My Philomel will bring them to me. She is a beautiful bitch, she watches me with her wise eyes and pricks her ears at my every word.

It is good to feel my heart pumping this morning, to feel the life coursing through my veins. The heat of my running enfolds me in the still air and I am thirsty. There is a smell of water in the air. I listen for the hounds, but they are far afield yet, slow in returning. I toss back my hair and settle my bow on my shoulder.

I will follow the scent of the water. My Philomel will lead them to me. It is good to be a hunter this morning, good to be young and strong. The water will be clear and cold and good to drink.

There; I can hear it, water and birdsong. My step quickens. I am tasting it in my mind, filling my cupped hands with water and lifting them dripping to my lips. I hear the stream. I part the branches.

I am not alone. There, on the far bank; a quiver and bow, a pair of unlaced sandals, a garment of snowy linen. I am not alone. There, in midstream; a woman bathes. I gaze at her. A snake of cold fear coils in my entrails.

I cannot leave, I cannot turn, I cannot go. My feet are rooted to the earth and my tongue has turned to stone in my dry mouth. She is beautiful. She bends at the waist like a dancer. I cannot see her face. Her limbs are long and slender. She scoops the water with cupped hands and it runs over her skin in rivulets, glistening in the sun.

She straightens. The curve of her back is more beautiful than a longbow. My heart pounds as if I am running. Her skin is smooth, it is the color of a fawn. The stream laps at her thighs. She moves, and shadows ripple in the hollow of her flank.

I have seen too much. I have seen too much. She is no mortal woman. She raises her arms to unbind her hair. It is braided in a long plait, silvery–blond, bound with a leather thong. I am shaking. The lines of her uplifted arms are beautiful. I glimpse one breast, shallow and perfect. I am shaking.

She pauses; her head turns. Her profile is as clean as a new–minted coin, as bright as a flame. I have betrayed my presence. She hears me, she senses me. She is no mortal woman. Father Zeus, help me, she is turning. She is beautiful. I am afraid to see her face.

I cannot move, I cannot speak. She has turned, she sees me. Oh, she is beautiful. She is scowling, her mouth is forming words. I cannot hear. Her anger is terrible.

She is speaking. I cannot hear. Fear clamors at my ears. I have seen too much. Her arm moves as if throwing a javelin, it is a blur of gold. It stops; her hand is raised, palm outward. Water, burning in the sun, drops of water, falling against me.

It burns, it burns. I fall to my knees, I am changing. Oh, there is a curse on the House of Thebes. My bones stretch and my sinews crack. I roll in my agony and the odor of bruised herbs fills the air. Her hand is raised against me. The light of her face streams like the sun between her outspread fingers.

My heart is swelling, it is swelling. It threatens to burst my ribcage. I am changing. My forelegs plunge, my hindlegs gather; I scramble to my feet. Oh, Father Zeus, I am changed. My head is heavy, she has crowned me with horns. I am the king stag, I am the prey.

I am trembling, my haunches quiver. Her eyes are terrible. I back a step. My sharp hooves bite deep into the loam, my lowered horns scrape the trees. Oh, her eyes are terrible. My legs tremble. I am the prey.

I whirl, I flee. My bursting heart pounds with speed and terror. I am running. My horn–crowned head is held high. I am the prey. Listen; I hear the hounds. They have found a trail. I plunge through the underbrush like the prow of a ship breaking through rushing waves.

I am running.

I am running and the fear is like knives in my heart. Listen, oh listen; the hounds are baying, they are all baying. They have found my trail. Her baying is like the voice of a bell, my Philomel, and she is never mistaken. My heart is pounding.

I am running. I am running.

New York Times bestseller Jacqueline Carey is the author of the *Kushiel's Legacy* series of historical fantasy novels, *The Sundering* epic fantasy duology, postmodern fables *Santa Olivia* and *Saints Astray*. Her most recent release, *Autumn Bones*, is the second volume in the *Agent of Hel* contemporary fantasy series. Jacqueline enjoys doing research on a wide variety of arcane topics, and an affinity for travel has taken her from Finland to China to date.

Further information is available at www.jacquelinecarey.com. Join her on Facebook at www.facebook.com/jacquelinecarey.author or follow her on Twitter at @JCareyAuthor.

Interview with Claire Humphrey

Maggie Slater

Claire Humphrey has witnessed more sides of the publishing industry than most writers see in a lifetime. By day, she works as a buyer with Indigo Books, and by night she is the reviews editor for *Ideomancer,* in addition to writing dark fictions of her own. Ms. Humphrey's work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *PodCastle* and *Interzone*, as well as many other magazines and anthologies.

This issue of *Apex Magazine* presents Ms. Humphrey's short story "The End of the World in Five Dates," a haunting glimpse into the mysteries of an impending apocalypse. She has also granted us a brief glimpse into her life for this interview, in which we discuss her time at the Viable Paradise workshop, the challenges of work–life balance, and the nature of success, among many other things!

About "The End of the World in Five Dates":

APEX MAGAZINE: "The End of the World in Five Dates" is very much focused on the theme of helplessness in the face of inevitability, particularly vivid in Cass' choice to disregard seeking further medical intervention with her gradually worsening knee and her certainty of the coming apocalypse. This helplessness, and the question of what happens to those who believed wholly in a prophecy that turned out to be false, was handled with such care and generosity — there's no sense whatsoever that Cass hasn't behaved rationally (if pessimistically), even when things don't work out as they first seemed. What inspired you to write this story?

CLAIRE HUMPHREY: My father died of cancer several years ago. When he was diagnosed, he was already at Stage 4. Some of the people in his life had a hard time hearing the prognosis, and believed he would be miraculously saved if he would only have a positive attitude and try their pet ideas — prayer, juicing, whatever. My father was pretty patient with these people, knowing they were trying to help, but he didn't share their agenda; he was more focused on making ready for the death he knew was coming. In the story, Cass turns out to be wrong about the inevitability; my

father wasn't. It struck me that the emotional process of dying was a lot of work, and that for someone in Cass's situation, it would also be a lot of work to turn around and come back to living.

AM: What was the drafting process like for this particular story? Do you find that for short fiction you tend to lean more towards planning out a tale from the very beginning, or do you like finding your way as you go?

CH: Normally, I'm a pantser — I start with a character and a problem they need to solve, and I find my way through by asking myself what the character would naturally do. With this story, the idea came to me first — I was having dinner with my very dear friend on one of the end–of–the–world dates and we were talking about meeting up for the next one, and thought that would be an interesting structure for a story. I wanted a protagonist who would know beyond a doubt that the world wasn't going to end on any of the highly publicized dates. How would she know? Well, she would have to be a prophet herself. And I realized that she would also have to have an emotional reason for *wanting* her vision to be true, at least a little. So then I knew she was facing something really tough. And the story fell into place really quickly after that.

AM: Every scene has a lovely sense of place, especially notable in the scene in which Cass is in Spain, eating pimientos and drinking wine. Was this scene drawn from personal experience, and if so, how did you come to settle on these specific details to evoke the scene? If not, how did you approach the research to make this scene feel so real?

CH: I have indeed sat in several plazas in Spain eating pimientos and drinking wine. (Luckily for me, I was just on vacation rather than checking off my last–minute bucket list.) I've been writing a lot lately about how pleasure can persist even when joy is hard to find. How very small things like a perfect flavour or the light on a bank of windows can pull you back from despair. That's always been true for me. I know, though, that people suffering from depression can lose their sense of pleasure — and that's the difference between Cass and Petra, and also the source of their connection. Petra isn't dying and doesn't believe the world is ending, but in the early

part of the story, she's having a hard time finding pleasure in anything, whereas Cass still has pleasures, but she's lost hope.

About Writing in General:

AM: Sometimes authors have an elements of writing which comes naturally to them (whether it's voice, characters, plot, dialogue, world–building, etc.). Do you find there are any particular elements of writing that come to you more easily? Others that you find especially challenging?

CH: That sense of place and physical detail you mentioned above, that's an easy one for me — I'm always recording my own experiences and I feel like I have a library of tastes and colours and touches to draw from. Dialogue, on the other hand, is tough — things I hear are not recorded in my mind the same way as my other senses. I don't recall conversations and I don't recognize voices easily. In the editing process I always have to sand down stilted conversations, pick easier words, pick more regionally appropriate words (for instance, my writing group has had to tell me multiple times that I'm the only person in our part of Canada who calls an apartment a "flat").

AM: How do you approach the revisions for a short story or a novel? Do you have any particular method of tracking your progress on an editing project to keep yourself on track? Do you utilize beta readers or go it alone?

CH: My writing group critiques almost all of my first drafts. Anything they don't have time for, I run by a couple of other beta readers. I take their feedback to the second draft, and then sometimes it works and sometimes it needs another round or two. I find I'm usually comfortable with two drafts for a story, but novels are a different ball game — the one I've finished had five or six false starts on the first half, and two very thorough rewrites. With a deep edit like that, I work on a few levels at once — a checklist for the kind of small fixes that apply to every scene, like tweaking voice in dialogue; an Excel file where I map out the scenes and smooth the structure and timeline; and a single–page all–caps note

posted prominently by my desk to remind me of the themes I need to touch everywhere.

AM: How did the experience of attending the Viable Paradise workshop impact your writing and/or evolve your writing career?

CH: It was, quite simply, the best choice I've made as a writer. Before VP, I was toiling away at a novel that was unsaleable, and I knew that, but I didn't know what else to do. I read about VP on Elizabeth Bear's LJ and I liked her books so I applied. I think I was expecting to get some useful advice on the piece I submitted, and I did, but that was actually the least influential part of the experience. Two other, much more important things happened: one, I learned about the short fiction market and jump–started my story–writing again (a piece I wrote there became my first pro sale a few months later), and two, I found my tribe.

AM: Working full–time in addition to pursuing your writing on the side can be quite the balancing act. How do you ensure that you get in the writing time you need, and how do you keep yourself on track (and sleep, from time to time)?

CH: I'm tempted to give the usual kind of answer here about writing for a single sacred hour every day or something like that, but it would be crap. I haven't achieved balance at all. I lurch from one thing to the next depending on what's about to burn down. I'm very motivated by deadlines; especially when editors solicit things from me, I deliver, but I might have to pull a couple of all–nighters to do it. Between deadlines, I chip away at the novel, aiming for a word count target each month. I get a lot done during interstitial times — in airport lounges, or at my in–laws' place while everyone else is playing board games. It's not so hard to meet my targets when the decks are clear, but throw in a business trip, a funeral, a three–day migraine, and all of a sudden I'm a month behind. Each year I take two weeks off during winter to bank some extra word count against those inevitable derails.

AM: You've seen many sides of the publishing industry, from slushing and editing to working for Indigo Books to the trenches of being a professional

author yourself. What is one thing you feel aspiring authors don't know that you may have learned from your time on the other side?

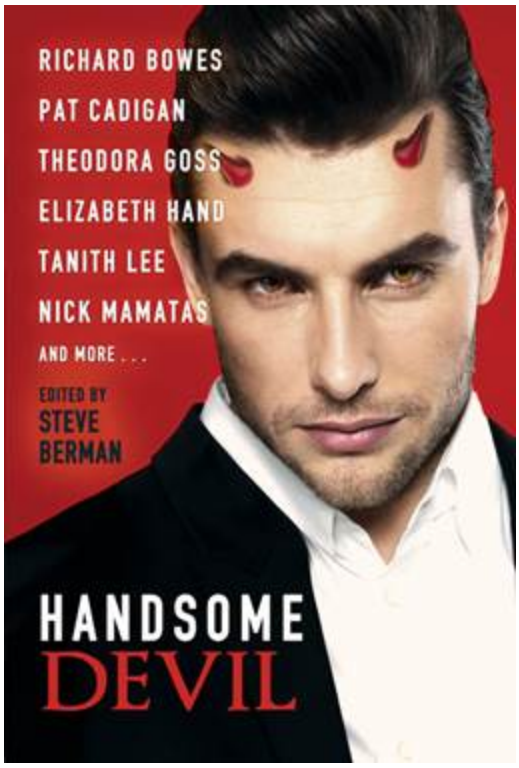
CH: The success aspiring authors imagine is very unlikely to occur. Most stories are rejected; most books never find a publisher; most self–published books don't sell. Most traditionally published books sell modestly. Many never make it to bookstore shelves; many are remaindered, or sadly, pulped. Most don't win awards. This is a very long game and we can lose at every stage. A lot of that stuff isn't within the control of the author. What is, though, is the part where we keep putting words on the page, more words, better words, more again.

AM: Who are you currently reading, fiction or non–fiction? Any recommendations?

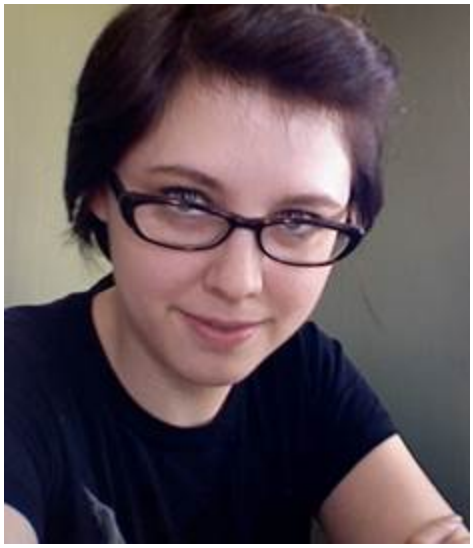
CH: *Hild* by Nicola Griffith: vivid, dense historical fiction; *Shattered Pillars* by Elizabeth Bear: second book in a totally engaging series; *Fear of Dreaming* by Jim Carroll, poetry I grew up to; and my contributor copy of *Heiresses of Russ 2013*, edited by Tenea D. Johnson and Steve Berman, a wonderful collection of the year's best lesbian speculative fiction.

AM: What (if you can say!) can we look forward to seeing from you in the coming months?

CH: I'm excited to see my story "The Witch of Tarup" included in *Long Hidden: Speculative Fiction from the Margins of History*, edited by Rose Fox and Daniel José Older, coming from Crossed Genres this spring. I have another new story called "Lilac Season" in Steve Berman's just–released *Handsome Devil*. And after that… I can't share the rest yet, but I will say it's a delight to finally be working on a project where I can describe what it felt like to be tear–gassed.



AM: Sounds exciting! Thank you so much for sharing “The End of the World in Five Dates” with us here at Apex, and for lending us some of your time for this interview!



Maggie Slater writes in Portland, where she lives with her husband and two old, cranky cats. She has seen her work published in a variety of venues, such as *The Storyteller Magazine*, *Fantastical Visions IV* and the anthology *Dark Futures: Tales of Dystopian SF*, from Dark Quest Books. She currently moonlights as an assistant editor for Apex Publications. For more information about her and her current writing projects, visit her blog at http://maggiedot.wordpress.com.

Invisible Bisexuality in Torchwood

K. Tempest Bradford

One of the best moments in any episode of *Doctor Who* is in "The Doctor Dances" when the Doctor explains to Rose that their new friend, Captain Jack Harkness, is "flexible" with his sexuality. Jack doesn't restrict himself to monosexuality. He doesn't even restrict himself to humans. He's an omnisexual man of the 51st century, ready to "shag anybody as long as they're gorgeous enough," as Toshiko Sato later puts it. Toward the end of "The Parting Of The Ways" when Jack kisses both Rose and the Doctor, he solidified his status as one of my favorite characters and I knew I'd follow him anywhere… even to *Torchwood*.

I've paid dearly for this love on many occasions.

For a long time I counted this price as worth it because I was happy to see a person of fluid sexuality on the screen who is a leading man, an object of sexual desire, and a fully fleshed out character. As a person of fluid sexuality myself (I usually identify as bisexual), I appreciate representation that doesn't marginalize or Other people like me. All too often mainstream media does just that. Even in supposed LGBT–friendly media, which is mostly about the G with the odd L thrown in. Don't even ask about the T.

My excitement about Jack increased tenfold when I started hearing more about the spin–off show Russell T. Davies created for him: *Torchwood*. At least one media outlet described all of the characters as bisexual[1], and in an interview with the Gay Times, Davies specifically laid out his vision as regarded sexuality[2]:

> "Without making it political or dull, this is going to be a very bisexual programme. I want to knock down the barriers so we can't define which of the characters is gay. We need to start mixing things up, rather than thinking, 'This is a gay character and he'll only ever go off with men'."

With this promising outlook, I jumped into watching *Torchwood* with no hesitation and a ton of positive feelings. I love Jack, I love *Doctor Who*, and I love fluid sexuality. What can go wrong?

Yes, I should have known better than to ask such a question.

At first, I was not as down on *Torchwood* as a whole as some other *Doctor Who* fans. The writing wasn't great in those first few episodes, sure, and there is plenty to raise an arched eyebrow at in the characterizations and choices made by Davies and Chris Chibnall, the show runner. But I always looked at *Torchwood* as televised *Doctor Who* fan fiction starring one of my favorite characters. Anyone who reads fan fiction knows that you will put up with a lot of terrible crap to read stories about the characters you love doing the stuff you want them to do.

The promise of a whole cast of bisexual characters also kept me watching. Yet the more I did, the more I realized that, like the cake in the video game *Portal*, the bisexuality in *Torchwood* is a lie.

Each of the main characters has sexual encounters with both men and women, yes, so on the surface things appear as Davies said they would be. When you take ten seconds to think about the nature of those encounters, or how they're often brief and easily dismissed, the supposed bisexual nature of the show gets fainter and fainter until it almost disappears.

In “The Epistemic Contract of Bisexual Erasure[3]” Kenji Yoshino explores how, in Western culture, both hetero– and homosexual communities, as well as the media, collude in systemic bisexual erasure via “the same three strategies…: class erasure, individual erasure, and delegitimation.” Because of Yoshino’s paper and more vocal activism within the LGBT community by bisexuals, the problem isn’t as pronounced or unnoticed as it was twelve years ago when the paper was published or even five years ago when the show premiered. It is still a problem, though, and *Torchwood* is an unfortunate exemplar of how bisexual erasure works in popular culture today[4].

The More Everything Changes, The More It Stays The Same

From the very first episode, *Torchwood* seemed in a rage to ensure the viewing audience understood how edgy and adult it intended to be. The scene that stands out most in my mind comes toward the middle of “Everything Changes” when members of the team are shown using alien artifacts smuggled out of the Hub. Owen takes a spray bottle of alien origin to a local night spot and makes a clumsy attempt at seducing a woman. When she doesn’t reciprocate, he sprays himself with whatever is in the bottle, which makes her want to shag him immediately. When the woman’s boyfriend chases after them and threatens Owen, he uses the spray again and the boyfriend reacts in the exact same way. Owen then joyfully calls for a taxi to take them both to his place.

I’m sure the scene was supposed to shout: “Look, look, it’s like we said! Totally bisexual because obviously Owen is going home with both!” What it actually shouted was: “Look, look! Owen is a rapist.”

This scene piles problems on top of problems. Not only do we have an unexamined rape going on that is never again mentioned or ever censured in the show, we also get a conflation of sexual desire with rape. Rape is about power, and Owen uses power to get what he wants even if that power doesn’t involve physical force. He uses his power to control on the man here not because of his sexual desires, but because this man is in the way of what he wants and the spray is the most effective tool at his disposal. The end result is sex, or so the audience is led to believe; that doesn’t have a thing to do with Owen’s sexual orientation.

This is our first example of the “very bisexual” *Torchwood*, and it doesn’t get much better from here.

In the next episode, “Day One,” an alien presence takes over the body of a young human woman named Carys. The alien inside her needs orgasmic energy to survive, so she seeks out sex. When the men climax, they’re destroyed and reduced to a tiny pile of ash. After the *Torchwood* team captures Carys, Gwen tries talking to her. The two end up in the cell together and, due to the powerful pheromones Carys is pumping out, they start to kiss passionately.

This is Gwen’s only “lesbian” moment. And it’s not happening because Gwen is attracted to women. It’s all because of these alien pheromones.

What’s even worse is that when the *Torchwood* team notices they watch with their tongues practically hanging out as if this is just some lesbian porn going on for their enjoyment. Sure, Toshiko seems to watch as avidly as Jack and Owen do, but it’s clear that this moment is there for the enjoyment of men, be they in the show or in the audience.

After this episode, Gwen never speaks of this incident again. We never see her show any interest in women sexually or romantically. That doesn’t mean she’s not bisexual — after all, not every bi person sits in the very middle of the spectrum. Some lean more toward men or women while still being attracted to both. And the entire time we know Gwen she’s in a monogamous relationship with Rhys.

Yet this doesn’t stop her from cheating on him. And, let’s be honest: there is never any danger of her breaking faith with her boyfriend with Toshiko.

Despite the equal opportunity snogging, the bisexuals are pretty invisible so far.

Going back to the scene between Carys and Gwen, right in the middle of their kiss Carys pushes Gwen away and says “No! It’s no good. It’s got to be a man.” According to script writer Chris Chibnall, sex between two women isn’t real enough for this alien. It’s just not real sex. Carys needs to have sex with men, and any man will do. At the end of the episode she goes on a sexual rampage through a sperm donation center. One of the men she encounters tells her that he’s gay, yet he still ends up as a pile of post–orgasm ash. Sex with an unwilling (and presumably limp) man is realer than what two women can get up to according to the show.

This is the first inkling we get of the larger problem in *Torchwood*’s “very bisexual” landscape.

LUG: Lesbian Until Girlfriend–Is–Sent–Into–The–Sun

After Owen and Gwen get their brief and passing same–sex shenanigans out of the way, it's Toshiko's turn. But here *Torchwood* had a surprise for us: Tosh's relationship with a woman is more than just a throwaway joke! It merits an entire episode's worth of plot and character growth.

In "Greeks Bearing Gifts" Tosh meets an enigmatic woman who gives her a pendant that allows her to hear other people's thoughts. This woman, Mary, turns out to be an alien who is manipulating Tosh for her own ends, but claims at several points that the feelings she has for her are real. Whether this is true or not is debatable. What's important is that at no time does Tosh indicate that what she felt was in any way not real or artificially induced. Kudos for that and kudos that none of the characters expressed surprise, shock or confusion when learning that Tosh had a relationship with a woman. It's treated no differently then if it had been a guy.

Unfortunately, those are all the kudos I have to give for this episode.

Despite at first seeming like a sign that *Torchwood* was finally going to start living up to Davies' promise, as the show went on it became clear that we weren't ever going to see the woman–loving side of Toshiko again and that queer female relationships were going to be thin on the ground.

The first problem is with Mary's role as an evil lesbian temptress, which hews far too close to Gay Panic stereotypes outlined by media commentator quarridors in her post exploring accusations of homophobia in *Torchwood*[5]. This wouldn't be as big a problem in the scope of *Torchwood*'s history if there were more queer women depicted in the series. But when there's a lack of representation, having the only representation involve negative stereotypes is an issue.

To date, there are only three other women on the show that are identifiable as lesbians or bisexuals, and two of them are by implication. Alice Guppy and Emily Holroyd of 19th century *Torchwood* (Exit Wounds) seem to be a couple; Charlotte Wills, the CIA/Families double agent (Miracle Day), explicitly mentions an ex–girlfriend. Other than these minor moments, queer female sexuality and relationships are noticeably absent from the *Torchwood* narrative. Compare this to how much screen time gay and male bisexual relationships get.

We never again see Tosh crush on, fall in love with, or even mention a woman as a past or potential lover. There are several episodes that focus

on or mention her attraction to and eventual relationship with Owen plus a charming episode where we find out she has a thing for a soldier from World War I who is kept in cryogenic stasis in the Hub (To The Last Man). Again, not all bisexuals prefer men and women equally, but the problem is that of imbalance in representation.

Looking at what the episodes offer us, it would be easy to conclude that Toshiko isn't normally attracted to women, that she was either under a spell or coercion or randomly experimenting. Thus, her bisexuality is made invisible.

It doesn't help that the actress, Naoko Mori, also undermines the idea of Tosh as a bisexual. Mori told *IF Magazine:*

> "For Tosh, I wouldn't say that she has any kind of label. The minute "Greeks Bearing Gifts" happened everyone assumed she was a lesbian or bisexual. It has nothing to do with that. She just happens to come across as someone she connects to and she just happens to be a woman. Not in a million years, did she ever think she would sleep with a woman, but it was about a human connection and a deeper connection. …It wasn't a sexual thing it was more to do with her finding an ally. …I've always tried to not to put a label on her. She's not gay, not that I'm condoning it or condemning it either way. It's just not an issue.[6]"

In an interview with About.com's Sci–Fi Guide, Mori reiterated these points:

> "…everyone is all like, 'Everyone [on *Torchwood*] is a bisexual or omnisexual and Tosh is a lesbian' and so on, and I'm like, you know what, I'm not going to go into that. Because for her, at the I think she was in a vulnerable place and Mary just happened to be the one. She needed intimacy. And here was a person that she could connect with, and she happened to be a woman.[7]"

I find her interview with Fantastic Hollywood the most intriguing:

> "…my main concern was to make sure that it wasn't seen as, for want of a better word, cheap. That it wasn't a, "Let's throw this lesbian thing in." …I talked at length with Russell [T. Davies] and the director, Colin Teague, who's

> brilliant… [about it not being] just a social thing. …She was vulnerable and lonely… and it just sort of happened to escalate into the sexual domain… but it wasn't a lesbian thing, per se.[8]"

And yet, here she also says that the episode "encapsulated everything about Tosh" and upon reading the script felt like "This is who she is. This is what Toshiko is all about."

What I see going on here is a strange hesitation to put a label on Toshiko concurrent with a sensitivity that just adding "lesbian" sexual content could be construed as something cheap (as we saw in "Day One") and that being a lesbian isn't an "issue" meaning that it isn't a bad thing. But if it isn't a bad thing, why did Mori repeatedly and explicitly remove that label from her character?

In a generous reading, I can see hints of Mori reaching for a utopia that doesn't yet exist. One where sexuality is widely accepted as fluid, and even if a person is normally attracted to the opposite sex, they can find themselves attracted to someone of the same sex under certain circumstances. And in an ideal world in which the issues of representation and marginalization aren't a problem, I can see this being sufficient. As a writer of fiction myself, I often advocate that science fiction and fantasy authors should depict the world they want to see as often as they reflect the troubling aspects of the world as it exists now.

Still, I keep looking at that tiny list of queer female characters in relation to the much longer list of queer male characters and the shadiness of that woman on woman action in "Day One" and this feels less like a utopian vision and more like an erasure.

No True Identity

The story around Ianto's bisexuality is the flipside of Toshiko's in that we only briefly see his relationship with a person of the opposite sex and the majority of screentime is devoted to his romance with Jack. Still, the realness of his bisexuality is, at first, supported by the show as well as by the actor himself. At least one author of an officially licensed tie–in novel understood Ianto to be bisexual. But, as always happens with *Torchwood*, things fall apart in the final act.

In the first series episode "Cyberwoman" we meet Ianto's girlfriend Lisa Hallet, a woman he loves deeply as evidenced by the great trouble he

went to in order to keep her alive. She dies at the end of the episode. Not long after it becomes clear that Ianto is giving in to Jack's long time advances. Over the course of the first two series he and Jack go from just casual shagging to a real relationship, though it is one the two of them struggle to define, as seen at the beginning of "Children Of Earth."

On the positive side, Jack and Ianto's love story isn't portrayed differently than other complex office relationships would be. Plus, the fact that he was in love with a woman and then falls in love with a man isn't presented as the most trying aspect of what's going on between them. On screen, we never saw Ianto struggle with his attraction to Jack in a way that made it seem like being attracted to a man was new for him.

The question of whether Ianto was always bisexual or just went gay for Jack has a different answer depending on who you ask. Gareth David–Lloyd, the actor who portrays him, told an interviewer that Ianto's attraction to Jack is "definitely a new thing as far as same–sex relationships go for him.[9]" In that same piece he said that if Ianto were to label himself, "he'd probably be bisexual" as opposed to omnisexual, the label often applied to Jack.

In *The Twilight Streets*, a *Torchwood* media tie–in novel by Gary Russell, Ianto tells Gwen that "[Being bisexual is] the worst of any world because you don't really belong anywhere, because you are never sure of yourself or those around you. You can't trust in anyone, their motives or their intentions. And because of that, you have, in a world that likes its nice shiny labels, no true identity."

Now, the canonicity of the tie–in novels isn't solid. They're officially licensed media, but the show may or may not stick to the backstories or character development in them. But the fact that Gary Russell saw this in Ianto's characterization is important to note, especially in light of what happens in "Children of Earth."

On day one of the third series, Ianto's sister reveals that her friend spotted him having a romantic dinner with Jack. He eventually admits that he and Jack are dating, but says, "It's weird. …It's not men. It's just him. It's *only* him."

When Ianto said these words it felt like a slap in the face. A character who, up until this point, didn't appear to have any angst or issues around the same–sex nature of his relationship was either lying to his sister about that or erasing bisexuality once again.

One might argue that Ianto simply lied. Even though his sister said that she didn't have a problem with him being gay or bisexual, her "some of my daughter's friends' mothers are lesbians" comment might have been enough to make Ianto doubt her sincerity on that point. Does saying you're only gay for that one guy that much better, though? I don't buy that Ianto was lying in that scene or that the writers intended it to come across that way when considered in context with the erasure elsewhere in the show.

The bitter end to all of this is Ianto's death in "Children of Earth." Ironically, this event may be the final proof that the character is indeed bisexual. After all, he dies for the purpose of giving a more important character angst and heart–rending development, a role all too often assigned to the character who belongs to the most marginalized group. Jack is the target of the angst–making, so it can't be him. And Gwen is the heteronormative standard–bearer. So Ianto it must be.

The Flexible Dancer

The foundation of *Torchwood* as a "very bisexual programme" rests squarely on the shoulders of Captain Jack Harkness. And, on the surface, he comes across as a bisexual character though he's specifically labeled omnisexual (no limits based on gender or species). But it's in looking deeper into Jack's actions during the four series of the show that it becomes apparent why *Torchwood* fails at bisexuality at almost every turn.

If we count up the relationships Jack engages in, the numbers come out pretty even between men and women. If you count up all the relationships we get to see happen on screen, more of them happen with men than with women. Other than Gwen, all of the ones with women happen off–screen.

In "Children of Earth" we find out Jack once had a wife (or a baby mama, at least). In "Small Worlds" we learn that Jack and Estelle had a serious thing going on back in World War II. All of this happens off screen. We rarely see Jack in romantic or sexual entanglements with women.

Men are a different story. Aside from Ianto, there's the real Jack Harkness in series one, Captain John Hart in series two, and Angelo Colasanto from "Miracle Day." Plus, when Jack goes out to seek physical comfort during the fourth series, he engages in meaningless sex with a man. Is it so hard to pull a woman? He reaches out for emotional comfort

from Gwen, sure, but never any other woman (that we see) in the entire course of the show. Why is that?

The entirety of Jack and Gwen's romantic relationship is suspect, particularly if considered in the context of it being evidence of his bi– or omnisexuality.

Aside from it feeling forced and unnatural, it's a relationship safe from consummation. From the very beginning Gwen is in a long–term, monogamous[10] relationship with Rhys. Even when she steps out on him, it's not with Jack. After she ends it with Owen, she reaffirms her commitment to Rhys and to heteronormativity by getting engaged and then married. She admits to loving Jack at a moment when it's guaranteed he won't remember it. And when he reaches out to her, desperate for a connection that binds only the two of them, she drops it without hesitation to reestablish contact with her husband and child.

As a viewer on the outside looking in, I can see that Jack and Gwen will never be together. Or, more to the point: the show will not allow them to be together. It's almost as if Gwen is a prop (or a beard) set up to prove Jack's flexibility while simultaneously not being a threat to his relationships with men.

In the end, it's John Hart's desire that saves him, Ianto's death that devastates him, and Angelo's betrayal that makes him the most important and dangerous man on the planet. Can any woman in Jack's life live up to all that?

Queer As Folk?

It would be easy to call out Russell T. Davies, Chris Chibnall, or other members of *Torchwood*'s creative team for the bisexual erasure chronicled in this essay, but I suspect that none of these people intended to marginalize bisexuality the way they have. I attempted to contact Davies, Chibnall and "Greeks Bearing Gifts" writer Toby Whithouse to discuss these issues with them; I never received a response. Given Davies' stated intention, I do believe that he did envision characters that knocked down barriers. The reality fell short.

The question we're left with is: why? There are two factors at work here, and only one is specifically about bisexuality.

The first is *Torchwood*'s tendency to marginalize or dismiss queer female sexuality. AfterEllen.com editor Karman Kregloe was one of the first to address this at the close of the show's debut series:

> "Sexual tension between the male characters, particularly Captain Jack and Ianto, is standard fare, whereas the women have very few sexual interactions that aren't quickly explained away by alien circumstances.
>
> In a lot of ways, *Torchwood*… is falling into the Queer as Folk mold. Gay and bisexual men are allowed to have fully developed social lives, while lesbian and bisexual women are added only as supporting cast members at best, and as mere afterthoughts at worst. That is somewhat expected given that Russell T. Davies is the creator of both shows, but that doesn't make it any less disappointing.[11]"

I would only quibble with her assessment on one point: the women on *Torchwood* are allowed to have fully developed social and romantic lives as long as they're doing so with men. Gwen and her boyfriend turned husband Rhys grow as a couple throughout the show, plus she gets to have a long–term dalliance with Owen. Toshiko also gets her dose of Owen in addition to her relationship with Tommy in "To The Last Man." The same pattern is visible with the important main and secondary female characters we see in "Children of Earth" and "Miracle Day" whose sexual lives we're privy to.

This suppression of queer female relationships and sexuality then erases bisexuality for the women in the show.

The first clue that this would happen is right there in Davies' early statement about *Torchwood*: "I want to knock down the barriers so we can't define which of the characters is **gay**. We need to start mixing things up, rather than thinking, 'This is a gay character and **he'll** only ever go off with **men**." (Emphasis mine.)

He doesn't mention lesbians or women there. He doesn't even use the fallback inclusive term "queer," just "gay" and "men."

Consciously or not, all of the show runners privilege relationships with men as paramount, more real, and more worthy of attention and growth. When it comes to relationships between women, even on the level of friendship, they're minimized, problematized, or dismissed. Very few episodes of *Torchwood* pass the Bechdel Test[12] despite there being two female main characters.

When it comes to the male main characters, issues cited by Yoshino's paper come into play. Bisexuality is presented as a dalliance rather than a valid identity. Except for one brief and disturbing moment, Owen only ever goes off with women. Ianto informs us that Jack is the only man he's interested in, and if that relationship ended we can only presume he'd go back to women. These two characterizations play off the stereotypes of bisexuals as fence–sitters or "really" straight or gay and in transition or experimenting.

When we're presented with a character of seeming legitimate bisexuality/omnisexuality, the net effect of his character arc ends up being a reaffirmation of monosexuality.

As a bi–identified person this makes me angry, As a fan of the show this makes me feel sad and disappointed. There's so much potential in *Torchwood* and it's regularly wasted. Having a cast full of bisexual characters could have been an opportunity to show a range of ideas about what constitutes fluid sexuality. Instead, we get the same old stereotypes before the concept is shoved away into a closet in favor of hetreo– and homosexual hegemony.

This is also a baffling place for Jack to have ended up. For someone who started out as a character that disrupted the heteronormative assumptions of the audience while also getting to be a hero, Jack's ultimate fate as the upholder of a different kind of status quo comes across as a betrayal of the

person we met in “The Empty Child/The Doctor Dances.” The idea of Jack as someone who doesn’t limit himself sexually or romantically by gender or species isn’t just a cool science fiction notion, it’s built on a real identity that real people have to negotiate in their real lives.

When you erase, dismiss or delegitimize these people via the few representatives of that identity — ones you specifically offered up — the results are not just some disappointing and and badly written hours of television, but real damage.

And even for someone who will put up with a lot of crap in my fan fiction, there comes a point when a story is so bad, or so painful, or so offensive that no matter how much you love that character, that pairing, or that kink, you cannot go on. I will always have a place in my *Doctor Who*–loving heart for Captain Jack, the flexible dancer who loved a Time Lord as well as he loved his companion. It’s just too bad that the Daleks killed him.

[1] “Dr Ooh Gets Four Gay Pals.” *The Sun*. 03 Aug. 2007. http://bit.ly/LFTnIa

[2] Martin, Daniel. “Jack of Hearts.” *Gay Times*. Oct. 2006.

[3] Yoshino, Kenji. “The Epistemic Contract of Bisexual Erasure.” *Stanford Law Review* 52.2 (2000): 353–461. kenjiyoshino.com/articles

[4] From this point forward I will use the term Bisexual almost exclusively even though this assumes that gender is a binary system. I don’t mean to imply that I accept this as a fact. However, since Davies uses the term bisexual and Torchwood never challenges the binary gender paradigm, I intend to interrogate this issue from that perspective.

[5] “…Mary arrives to corrupt poor innocent Tosh into betraying the team through the temptation of lesbian sex — looks like a classic Gay Panic story…” quarridors.dreamwidth.org

[6] Elliot, Sean. “Exclusive Interview: NAOKO MORI ON ‘TORCHWOOD’ & NO MORE AB FAB — PART 2.” *IF Magazine*. Electric Entertainment, 29 Feb. 2008. http://bit.ly/Kqf5lp

[7] Wilson, Mark. “Interview: Naoko Mori.” About.com Sci–Fi / Fantasy. About.com, n.d. http://bit.ly/Mu9I3i

[8] Harris, Will. “A Chat with Naoko Mori of Torchwood.” Premium Hollywood. 11 Sept. 2008. http://bit.ly/Lellft

[9] Jensen, Michael. “Interview with Torchwood’s Gareth David–Lloyd.” After Elton. Logo Online, 26 Feb. 2008. http://bit.ly/GEsu5S

[10] It’s clearly meant to be monogamous because Gwen feels guilty for sleeping with someone else and needs Rhys’ forgiveness (which he does not bestow) in order to feel right with herself.

[11] Kregloe, Karman. “Bisexual Women Are Alien to ‘Torchwood’” After Ellen. Logo Online, 6 Mar. 2007. www.afterellen.com

[12] TV Tropes has an excellent summary of what the Bechdel Test entails: http://bit.ly/HOSP2o

K. Tempest Bradford is a speculative short story writer by night, a technology journalist by day, and an activist blogger in the interstices. You can find her fiction, other thoughts on media and culture, extensive rants, and an unhealthy obsession with the Ninth Doctor on her website at KTempestBradford.com.

Interview with Julie Dillon

Loraine Sammy

Julie Dillon is a freelance illustrator from Northern California. She has won the Chelsea Award, and was nominated for the 2013 Hugo.

Apex Magazine: Can you tell us a little bit about yourself as an illustrator?

Julie Dillon: I just really enjoying creating in general; I used to also write stories and play music and do different crafts, but illustration ended up being the creative outlet that I focused on for my career. I feel like illustration gives me the flexibility to tackle more abstract or loose ideas, as well as just enjoy the process of putting time into developing a skill. I get really excited by interesting composition and color and storytelling possibilities, and I'm very grateful that I'm getting to a point that I have enough experience to execute the ideas I come up with.

AM: 'Ariadne' is a very haunting piece, which follows the line of sight from the looming Minotaur to Ariadne herself in the maze. Can you describe what your inspiration was behind this piece of work? Was it in any way a challenging piece to create?

JD: A while back I was asked to do some mythology sketches, and one of the ideas I came up with was a sketch with Ariadne searching for the Minotaur in the labyrinth. Unfortunately the concept was rejected by the client and we went in another direction. I really liked the idea, though, so I kept it on the back–burner for a while. Months later, I was musing on the idea again, and it occurred to me how interesting it might be to have the Minotaur looming huge beyond the horizon line, dwarfing the labyrinth instead of being dwarfed by the labyrinth. When I started sketching it out, I started thinking about curving the horizon. It doesn't necessarily make a lot of narrative sense, but I really like the visual.

The perspective was definitely a challenge, but what helped was finding the right perspective grid to work from. I did a Google search for pictures of wireframe spheres and fish–eye perspective grids, and used those to

help give me a reference for how to structure the labyrinth while still making it look like it was a spherical surface.

AM: Your website gallery features a healthy blend of bright, stunning colours in all of your paintings. Do you have any favourite palettes? What attracts you to utilizing vivid painting techniques and colors in your pieces?

JD: I was noticing when going through my gallery a little while ago that I seem to lean towards a lot of gold, blue, and purple in particular. I like those brighter color schemes because they are so lively and energetic and eye catching. Sometimes I try to make an effort to dial back the color, but in the end I always making it more vivid. I'm drawn to art and design with bold complementary color schemes, and I try to recreate that in my own work because it's just something I find more exciting and evocative.

AM: I noticed on your blog that you have a fascinating step–by–step screen shots of your work, from thumbnails to completed piece. I think artists and art–lovers alike really enjoy seeing an artist's process. How did you come upon this process? Is there a lot of trial and error, or do you have it down to a set system?

JD: It was definitely trial and error, plus combining ideas and tips from other artists over time. Years ago, I used paint straight with color without doing a sketch or greyscale composition. However, when I started doing more freelance work, it became necessary to send black and white sketches to my clients for them to approve before I began the color stage. I didn't like working with line art, so I had to figure out how to add color to my messy greyscale paintings, and I found that using color blending modes in Photoshop (Overlay layers, Multiply layers, Hard light layers, etc) gave me a good way to do just that. It turns out it's similar to how some oil painters work; you create a sketch, and then tint it with an quick wash to create an underpainting before beginning the main work of the painting.

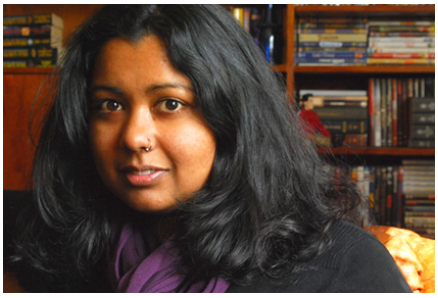
AM: What interests you about illustrating and drawing art for the science fiction, fantasy and horror genres? Do you have a preference for any particular genre? What do you love drawing the most in these genres?

JD: I'm probably more drawn to fantasy and magic realism. I've always liked those genres in general, and I like being able to create work that resonates with me and lets me stretch my imagination a bit more than if I was doing more scholarly studies. I like taking something that could be a more straightforward fine art subject and twisting it just enough to give it a more magical unreality. Fantasy, scifi and magic realism help stir people's imaginations, and helps them try to see beyond or appreciate what is often dismissed as mundane.

AM: Congratulations on the Hugo Award Nomination! How do you feel about being the only woman nominated for this category in over 20 years?

JD: On the one hand, it's a huge honor to be nominated, and I am incredibly grateful. But it's also unfortunate that there haven't been other women nominated in such a long time, especially when there are some very talented women in the field who I feel should have been honored before me. Hopefully we'll start seeing even more women being recognized and earning more rewards in the arts in the coming years.

AM: Thanks again, Julie. We look forward to seeing you acquire further awards for your work!



Loraine Sammy's involvement in the online creative world has taken her across the United States, attending conventions and conferences for multiple fandoms and cultural media events. As co–founder of racebending.com, she has done various presentations and panels on equal representation in modern entertainment, encouraging active participation from media consumers. However, her one true passion is rooted in the world of art and artists. As a professional and freelance illustrator, Loraine is endlessly fascinated by the wide impact that visual creativity has on our society, and vice versa. Ultimately, it is artistic diversity that keeps Loraine enthralled by the wonder of our collective human imagination.

She currently lives in Vancouver, BC — but this particular Canadian is neither mild nor apologetic, eh. Her website: lorainesammy.com

Tempus

J.J. Hunter

He made time from spinning seconds collected from door jambs
where passersby would pause, lost in transition
shedding tufts of unheard ticking and occasional moments of pure grace
he stood askew from busyness and breathed it loose
gently drawing out forgotten strands to ply back into the whole

and as his fingers worked his mind wound back
to lazy Sunday reunions at the foot of Mt. Olympus
where family was as oft monster as divine
and aunt Clotho sat him down for lessons with a nod

let other men swing swords in clumsy imitation of her sister's shears
his needles knitted time into what was needed most
a day longer to say goodbye, a heartbeat more for judgment
and his especial favorite: emergency baby blankets
for parents who needed every scrap of time they could find
and infants who could never get enough

his twin found her gift in carving time in wood
shaping years into subtle rings of stories that now always were
but he preferred crochet
he smiled at the jokes on the train and patiently
cast another stitch in time to ease its passing.

J.J. Hunter lives by the motto, “Think like a scientist, dream like a poet”. In addition to some truly magnificent experimental pizza topping combinations over the years, this has led her to work in science education design, and to cultivate playful exploration of the bounds of things.

J.J. makes her home in Boston, MA. She is the founder and co–admin of the online poetry discussion community POETREE @ Dreamwidth.

The Parable of the Supervillain

Ada Hoffmann

Don’t think I didn’t watch the news, sister of mine,
in those days. Don’t think I didn’t see you
in that mountaintop palace strewn with blood–red bones,
the mosasaur moat, the horned, hooved footmen.
At four in the morning with the baby biting me,
I watched you call the President of Australia
from his velvet bed
and feed him to the army ants.
You were never satisfied. Money, sex, guns, velociraptors:
Mother only wanted your voice on the phone.
You wanted the world.

Evil, they said. Pray for her soul, they said,
for her to step down meekly right this instant
and join some convent, or die. But I clung to the television
not knowing what I felt, at first,
pretending to change diapers and scrub sheets,
not knowing half of it was envy.

They broadcast that final battle of yours —
you remember, I’m sure — and I scratched tic–tac–toe
in my arms to wake myself.
I often dreamed they’d murdered you because I’d put a foot wrong:
I’d made the wrong face
or whispered your name to my son.
Those grim, strapping, blue–pyjamas men:
I watched them fly. They shattered stones with their hands
and cracked wise like you were nobody’s sister.
That last explosion, like a nursery–school
spilled can of paint, Golden Yellow and Clementine
licked with Sea Green.

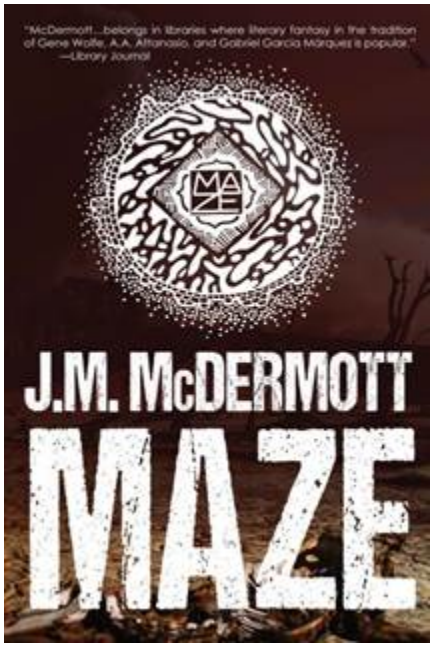
Of course they never found your body.
Finding people is a black art, sister —

ask me about the time I lost my husband.
One morning, the squeeze of his sweaty arms:
the next, nothing. Bedclothes in disarray.
It took a month to find him:
lazing in the U.S. Virgin Islands
with a younger me whose voice didn't choke
when they broadcast endless sparkling parades
for your defeat.
I get it, sister.
I know the rage that fills a woman,
swelling you up cumulonimbusly
until not even the President of Australia
could be enough.

So don't grovel like that on the doorstep.
I can't offer much:
I don't keep army ants
or a bathtub big enough for your mosasaur.
But the guest room's clean.
Don't beg for forgiveness like I'm one of them, sister,
like I'll put on blue pajamas and blow you to smithereens
if you cry the wrong number of tears.
You don't know what you did for me
in your old defiance. Please, come in.
There's tea in the kettle, soup on the stove,
and a six–year–old, chocolate–smudged nephew I'd like you to meet.
We can talk until sunup and past,
if you like. Don't sorry me. We're sisters.
You're home.

Ada Hoffmann is a Canadian author whose poetry has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Goblin Fruit*, *Stone Telling*, and *Mythic Delirium*, and has been nominated for the Rhysling award. When she isn't singing, LARPing, or noodling around with computers, she also writes short prose fiction, and she made her first professional sales in 2013.

Ada blogs about speculative fiction and autism at ada-hoffmann.com, and you can find her on Twitter at @xasymptote.


"McDermott...belongs in libraries where literary fantasy in the tradition of Gene Wolfe, A.A. Attanasio, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez is popular."
—Library Journal
J.M. McDERMOTT
MAZE

Maze
By J.M. McDermott

From every corner of time and space, sometimes people go missing without a trace. They never come back.

Get lost in the long stone halls of the maze with the ones that find each other, form tribes, scrape out a life from rocks and sand. Their stories interweave. Maia Station is a scientist ripped from stasis, but she has no tools to test the way things are. Instead, she raises her daughter as best she can and survives. Wang Xin once had his head dipped in water, and a djinni in the water entered his eye. He sees the future, exactly as it was supposed to be if he hadn't seen the light, but it does him no good in the life he has. In a world much like our own, Joseph comes home from a ten year high school reunion and encounters a light in the darkness. The light speaks.

My name is Jenny. Put me in your lung.
Breathe deep.

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NOVEL EXCERPT

Maze

J.M. McDermott

1: Who Am I?

My name is Maia Station.

I was born in the sky, on a station. I never expected to be anywhere else. I was a scientist, but I can't remember how to do anything scientific after ten years surviving in this maze. The tools I took for granted before this life are gone. The great coils and conductors and artificial constructs that I used to treat like toys are as distant as the stars in the sky. My memories of the station and my memories of here are all disjointed, as if everything before the maze is wrapped in silver gauze — my mother, my childhood friends, all the things I did and learned — until the tear, when I woke up in the maze, and sand ground away my mind.

I think it would help if anyone believed me among the other survivors I found here. No one else came from the sky, or even from a time when such a life was conceivable. I'm alone here, with my daughter, Julie. She doesn't believe my stories, either. She only knows the maze.

I don't know how it all happened — how I arrived here from there. None of the others do either. I remember entering my private chamber on the station. I closed my eyes to sleep. I don't know what happened next. I was awake in what seemed like moments, though centuries had passed, swallowed up by speed and light, and the station was long gone and I was here, in the maze, alone.

It has been years since I woke up. I found a tribe of people who found themselves here, like I did. My daughter, Julie, was born here. I was pregnant with her when I found the tribe. Before I came to this tribe, I met Saitan. I met his satyr. I met Julie's father. I met myself.

I never speak of what happened when I first arrived here, because I want my daughter to be safe, accepted, and loved by all the people here. The blood in her veins will keep her safe just as it kept me safe when I was pregnant with her, as long as I never tell anyone what happened.

§

I have a nightmare of the satyr of Saitan, hunched over the corpse that birthed him, devouring himself. In the nightmare, I see my daughter, Julie,

devouring there, with him, like a monster. But I wake up and I look at her and she's not like the satyr was. She's a beautiful girl, and she looks just like me when I was a child. She's clever. She has friends among the tribe. No one thinks she's different. She's my daughter, and I love her, and I'm not afraid of the light. The maze is dangerous enough without being afraid of my own child. I wonder — half–hoping — if the blood of the maze will protect her even when the dangerous things would devour the rest of us. I wonder — half–hoping — if Julie's blood will protect the people here like it protected me.

§

Julie, my beautiful daughter, sat down to eat the flatbread I had made for her from the wheat and rice we grew by the pond and the acorns of the trees that grew here, where a lake used to be, among the maze walls. Julie had been playing all day long.

I had been teaching her to count and she told me that there were exactly eight trees. She was off by a hundred or so, not counting the saplings we had cut down for wood and spears, or the bushes that grew in the marshy waters of the pond. Julie explained that she had decided only eight trees were large enough to count. I suspected she forgot what came after eight.

There was no school in the maze. There was only survival.

Julie reached for food, but I took her hand in mine and turned her around. She had blood on her arm, near her shoulder.

"Julie, are you okay? Did you cut yourself?"

"No, Mama."

Was it hers? I ran my hand around the blood and puckered her white skin for any sign of cuts. She was unhurt.

"Where did this blood come from?"

She shrugged. She reached for her food. I stopped her hand.

The children had all seen death before. They could not be protected from it here. Each spring the dancing women dressed up the children in feathered costumes like vultures and banged drums for them and the children danced around a fire. When they reached the center, they threw their costumes into the flames with a cheer. Some of the people here

treated this like a prayer against death, but I told Julie it would never work. We knew better because we — Julie and I — were scientists, and this festival was only good for the fun of dancing.

I brushed Julie's hair away from her face with my hand. It wasn't her blood.

"How did you get blood on your arm, Julie?"

"I don't know, Mama."

"You must have rubbed up against something. Go take a bath."

"What? Why?"

"Blood is dirtier than mud."

"Mama…"

"Don't argue with me, Julie. There are things in blood — in everyone's blood — that you cannot see. Very small things that are like ants nibbling at you. There are tiny things in your blood that try to kill the ants, like spiders so tiny you cannot see them."

"I don't believe that, Mama. That's stupid. Why can't I believe what others do? It's just blood. Lucius says we should drink blood. Saitan smears it on the lips of his dead family's souls."

"We are scientists, Julie. We are not like Saitan at his grandmother's idols, or Lucius kneeling for two sticks, or Joseph and Gokliya leaving flowers on graves to speak to the dead, or Huzzar, the Mahometan always washing his hands in dirty water, or the dancing ones. Julie, we focus on what is known, what can be proven repeatedly. Listen, I'll prove that blood is dirty to you, too. Just go take a bath first, while I get the experiment ready. Find a good stone and scrape away all that sweat and mud."

"I don't want to."

"Right now, Julie. Go."

§

Like I said, my name is Maia Station.

I was born in space, on a beautiful station, and that was what everyone called me because I told them about it when I learned the language here. I still don't know how I came here from there.

Here, time is blood; blood is time.

We know our trails, and we know our village, but I know that traveling too far changes the age of the air. I saw it for myself, crossing trails underground. Time flows through these hallways, but it happens on a scale so big it’s hard to for us measure — maybe impossible.

The maze’s stone hallways open to an empty sky. Seasons roll in and away, and as long as I hold still, all things are the same — and stable.

Stay where you are, if you find a good place where there’s food and fresh water. That’s what Enyo Gyoja says. He’s the leader of our nameless community, if anyone is. I think he’s right. If I don’t know how I came to be here, I don’t know how to go home. If I don’t know how to go home, I had best make my home where I can, raise my daughter, and hope for her the best future I can give to her.

I can live with anything, even death, if I know my daughter will have a better life than this.

2: Here

Before I came to the maze, I was asleep — in deep soma; I had no dreams. I was amniotic. I was saline. I was still. Somewhere in the hidden places of my consciousness, the high whine of engines spinning slipped into silence.

I couldn’t breathe. I grabbed at my neck, but I couldn’t reach it. My helmet was in the way. I clawed at it, gasping for air, and jackknifed on the ground. I was under a wall of stone bricks. Snow was on the ground. My faceplate cracked on something like a rock beneath the snow. A brick had fallen from the wall and had hidden itself beneath the white snow. The brick saved my life.

My face smashed against the brick inside the snow. My mask cracked clear. I could breathe. Behind me, the umbilicals were all torn. Wounded silicates oozed oils and liquid oxygen. I tugged at the lashes and bindings of the outer shell. I didn’t have the tools to unwind myself from the steel. I did the best I could. I disconnected the draping umbilicus. I got my torso free, and one of my arms. I left the lost parts where they fell.

The helmet came off with help from both my hands and the life–saving brick.

I was alone.

I was in the maze, but I didn’t know where I was, and I didn’t know it was a maze. Too thirsty to think, I swallowed the snow. It burned. It was so cold. I saw a bird flying overhead, small and soft, or it could have been an insect, hard with chitin that my blurry eyes had softened into a bird. My body was not ready to be alive.

I climbed carefully to the top of the wall. The stones were wet, but they could be climbed. I straddled the wall, cautiously. I looked all around at the new world I had found. The gnarled stone passageways crawled over the horizon to one side. To the other, a hill peaked, with a cliff and caves along the cliffs. I thought I saw something moving there. I squinted. My eyes ached from sunlight, when starlight and bioluminescence were all my eyes had ever known. I couldn’t pull a shape out of the cliffside hints of motion.

I found this maze: pathways, and all pathways, and all stone. From where I was, walls rose far past my head and rising and falling like jagged teeth where the bricks at the top had eroded away.

As I walked, I coughed up the blue sick of the liquid oxygen and mineral blends. I stripped away the small bits and pieces of my suit that hampered my movement. I was still not alive enough to feel the full weight of pain from my sudden transition.

I kept my boots on.

I struggled with my own weight. I was newborn. I stopped to curl up into a ball against a wall and rest my burning legs. My palms pressed into my empty stomach. I hadn't eaten anything in forty–two years. My body cried out for food, and I had none. I had snow that burned with cold.

(Geophagy: I would do anything to quiet my insides. My eyes scoured the ground for handfuls of dirt that wouldn't hurt. I drooled. I pictured stones cutting up my fragile intestines, where the bacteria hadn't yet rebuilt their devastated kingdoms beneath my skin.)

I was going the wrong way. I looked over my shoulder. The hill was behind me. I didn't have the strength to turn around. I walked forward. I came to so many crossroads. I didn't have the will to choose. I stumbled and fell.

I fell against a wall. I slept.

Pulled from sleep, returned to sleep. I had the numb certainty of death inside me.

Had we crashed somewhere? Had some unknown tractor beam hurled us upon an atmosphere where my pod had crumbled and spit me out among these bent pathways? There were no smoking ruins on the horizon. Nothing beeped inside of me. Nothing trembled in the air where the blast would have unwound the snow clouds, darkened them, and pressed a burning stink of devastation.

I awoke to darkness and silence. I blinked into the moonless night. I held still. The snow draped me in chill. I felt the melted snow seep into my clothes. My death would be miserable and cold. I did not have body fat to warm me. I did not have anything.

The sun rose a little bit. I was barely alive. I crawled. I crawled slowly.

I chose a path among the forking hallways. I turned a corner and crawled. I was at the base of the hill's cliff. I touched the rock. It was all limestone, white as the cliffs. I scratched at it with my fingers. I had no sense of geology here. The maze walls were bricks — I thought — but underground were, perhaps, bricks that had been weighted down to limestone.

The ground was covered in mud beneath the snow. Below the cliff, the mud was off–white with chalky cliff erosion and only just discernible from the snow.

There was a cave. Along the side of the cliff, the sheer white rock crumbled inward like a tooth's cavity.

I was hungry. I was cold. I could only crawl, sick as I was from coming up in a blink of an electron through what should have taken days.

I struggled into the black. I stopped when I couldn't move anymore. It was warmer underground, but only just. How long did I have until hypothermia set in and killed me? I had already lived far longer than I deserved.

Underground, I was out of the frozen breeze and the damp.

I stripped the last of my shell off. I peeled the elastane skinsuit away completely. I laid it out on the ground. I pulled myself to standing, to air out. I needed to lose the water against my skin, even if it hurt more. Water would freeze me to death.

I heard sounds echoing up from the depths, like the sound of the engine in my lost night sky. Something moved in a pulsing, regular, grinding way.

I waited, alone, for a thousand upon a thousand upon a thousand seconds, all of them terrible.

I knew I was going to go deeper underground, whether there were sounds or not. It was warmer there. I longed for lava and steam. I refused to be afraid of noise until I could deduce what was making the sound. I told myself that an animal would be just as afraid of me as I was of it.

When I was drier and too cold to stand it a moment longer, I pulled what I could of my clothes over me again. I was weak. I couldn't lift the remnants of the shell off the ground, much less pull it over my body again. I left it there.

It was warmer underground.

Crawling, afraid of sudden drops, I ran my hands over the ground ahead of me before pulling my weary body deeper into the black void.

My hand touched something cold and sponge–like, with a sticky sheen over it that smelled familiar. I explored it gingerly with my hands, found bones beneath the surface. I stopped touching it.

Toes. A foot. An Achilles' tendon.

Adrenaline doesn't just kick in. It takes a few seconds. I looked into the darkness. I imagined all sorts of shapeless, monstrous things. Adrenaline

burst inside me like a fear balloon.

I heard the sound again, closer.

Too weak to run, I wanted to run. I thought I was going to die there. I curled into a ball. The noise came into the room, beside me. Turning my head, I didn't know what I'd see, if I could see it at all.

Light flickered in the dark, a puff of neon cotton floating in the air like a wind–blown seed.

It was speaking, I think. I could hear something like a voice at the edge of sound, pulsing like an engine in the background of the air.

"Did you say something?" It hurt to speak. My throat burned. I was rasping. I couldn't understand myself. I thought I tasted blood in my throat from speaking.

I listened closely.

Put–me–in–your–lung–put–me–in–your–lung–put–me–in–your–lung–put me–in…

"What are you?" My lips cracked, and I was bleeding. I licked at the blood with my tongue. It tasted good.

Help–me–put–me–in–your–lung–help–me–help–me–put–me–in–your–lung–help…

I wanted to. I wanted to help the light. I had been a helpful person on the station, where we were friendly to each other and tried to help. Whatever it was, I couldn't help it. How could I help the light if I was dying? "No," I said. I curled away. I was in a strange land. I was starving to death. "You need to help me. I need food and water. I'm dying."

Please–help–me–please–put–me–in–your–lung…

The light came closer to me. I backed away farther.

"Help me, and I'll help you."

The light quieted, like it was thinking.

Follow.

The light, in silence, descended beyond the body. It kept going and going. I could barely make it out. I waited in terror — trembled with it and choked down my moans of death terror.

What else could I do?

I followed the light. I would have followed it anywhere.

§

I wasn’t sure where the light was taking me.

I scrabbled on hand and foot through the stone. We came to junctions where eternal darkness and a gust of wind, maybe a sound, drifted up from some great depth, only to die in moments at the turning path.

Follow.

Down and down and down. The flittering light approached a darkness I thought to be a great cavern, but the presence of the little light unraveled the illusion. It wasn’t so large, when the light traversed it.

Follow.

We turned a corner to a stairwell of stone bricks, worn with age and countless misshapen feet. The stairs were the wrong size for me. They were tiny and awkward to crawl down. I couldn’t have stood up, though, even if I had been strong enough for it. My knees hurt more than they had ever hurt in my life. I had scrapes and bruises. The lip of the stairs hurt me. I tried to bend into a beastly crouch.

Follow.

Down and down, until I could not move my joints. I collapsed.

Just before darkness, something picked me up by the waist, carried me like a doll. It was cold and hard and I didn’t know what it was, but I didn’t care.

I was amniotic — saline. Dead. Gone.

§

Flickering light woke me up. I was warm, too. My eyes focused: a fire. I was in a large cavern. The fire threw off steady heat, and I wanted to curl up into it like a piece of charcoal.

“Are you awake?” said someone — a woman’s voice, and familiar.

I saw no sign of the tiny light. I had imagined it. I was sure I had imagined it.

My voice was barely a crackle. I was so hungry I couldn’t even feel it. I just knew it.

A puddle of still water was in a hole in front of me. I dropped my face into it. I drank so fast that I vomited the water back into the water, but I kept drinking anyway.

I had trouble lifting my head out of the puddle, but I did it to gasp between gulps.

“Food?” said someone. She helped me lift my head from the water, and she placed soft meat in my mouth.

I swallowed. I was afraid I was going to choke, but I couldn’t stop swallowing. I was so hungry.

“Don’t hurt yourself,” she said. She patted me gently on the back.

I looked up. I was looking at myself.

“I know,” she said. “I remember what I thought. Am I Maia? Am I you?” she said, speaking where I could not. “Yes, it’s me. But I’m you from the future. Kind of. Time here is… well, you’ll see it for yourself.”

“What?” I said.

“Do I really sound like that? You sound like an old, old woman, yet we’re so young. You sound sick. Got something to show you,” she said. She turned sideways and pointed at her stomach. “Look at this.” Her stomach bulged, like an infection. The skin was taut around the bulge.

Oh, my reflection was pregnant. Months pregnant, from the look of her.

“How did that…” I tried to speak, but I couldn’t.

“Wait a bit. I’ll help you a while longer, but then I have to go. I wish I could stay, but… it’s too dangerous with the baby, and I don’t really know how to take care of you here. Look, I’ll tell you everything. You can’t believe how wonderful it is to have someone to talk to that understands me. I’ve been silent down here for I don’t even know how long. I was ripped from stasis. I was asleep in the stars, and… then, I went underground.”

“I know,” I groaned.

She had a pile of meat behind her. She handed it to me in soft strips. It was cooked and soft and I ate it so fast I couldn’t tell if it was good or bad.

“Of course you know, but there’s more,” she said.

“Obviously,” I said. The baby.

“Rest up,” she said. “I can wait another fire or two before I go. When we start running low on meat, though, I’ll have to go. I know you’ll survive. I don’t know if I will.”

“How do you know? If time doesn’t work right…”

“We don’t have the luxury of reason right now.”

“Reason is not a luxury.”

“Perhaps you are right.”

“Don’t do that.”

“What?”

“Don’t give in like that,” I said. “I know what you’re doing. That’s my trick. I pretend to agree to prevent an argument.”

“I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“Where are we, Maia?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “There’s no sign of the station, or anyone from the station.”

“What do I do next?”

“I don’t know if I can tell you or not. I don’t know what the rules are,” she said. “Get yourself ready.” She said nothing else.

I wasn’t ready. She walked away from the fire, into the darkness. She was gone a while. I wondered if she was coming back. She returned with snow cupped in her hands. She placed it in a rocky indentation in the ground, to melt it at our fire. She drank first. Then, I drank.

“Close your eyes, Maia,” she said. “Rest while you can.”

“What about you?”

“As long as we stay quiet we should be fine. Close your eyes, Maia. I’ll keep watch for you.”

I didn’t argue. My belly was full. My throat didn’t burn so much. My nose ran and I thought I was going to be running a fever soon, but there was nothing I could do about that.

I slept. I had a nightmare of unceasing darkness.

Maia was gone when I woke up. The fire was fresh. The meat was still there, in a pile.

Never trust yourself.

I refused to take comfort in knowing I had met myself. I was a scientist. I refused to believe my eyes alone after so much fear and hardship and unknown things. I needed to trust science and reason and test any hypothetical truth I encountered.

§

I ate what was left. I crawled up to sitting. I thought I might be able to stand, if I concentrated. I was better. I was stronger. I still had a fire.

Where did the other Maia get the wood?

I looked closer. The wood was shaped like gnarled body parts. I could make out two monstrous palms with sharp claws, of wood. Bits of legs and things looked like organs, knotted up like knobs of pine.

I squinted out to the edges of my firelight. I moved cautiously over the stones.

This pile must have been where she had gotten the wood. I saw what appeared to be a pile of limbs, there. I saw these living limbs and organs, all piled up, all of wood and bent and mangled like vines grown into bipedal locomotion, never carved. It reminded me of the rubbish bin behind the botanist's lab.

I tried to pick up one of the pieces there. It was attached to the larger structure. The vines grew in these monstrous shapes.

I could not get anything loose. I walked around, to the edges of the cave plant. It was circular, like a leafless shrubbery. At its highest, it was no taller than my waist.

My fire died down, and I had harvested no more sticks. How could I, without a cutting tool or genuine strength of limb? I knew it was happening. I sat near the fire, watching the embers smolder. I was afraid to fall back into darkness. There was nothing I could do without abandoning this warm shelter.

I closed my eyes; then, I opened my eyes.

There was a light, after the embers.

The limbs of the strange bush surrounded a funnel of the lights. I heard no voices in the dark. I could barely see the limbs. I could barely see at all, except I knew there was light here.

I walked around the cavern, searching for the way up and down.

The death rot still stank. The way to the top, then, could be past the body I had found in the dark, when I had crawled underground.

I picked my way cautiously through the hallways, toward the stink of death.

I found the body. My feet kicked up against sticky damp and bones. I passed beyond the stench, through the cave, and up to the sliver of light at the rocky maw. I peered through the crevice. The sun was warm in my

face. The ground was clear of snow. Small grasses, green as springtime, crept along the chalk wall.

I walked carefully down, searching for my suit. I tried to retrace my path, with no sign on the ground that I had passed this way, scraping my knees and elbows on the rocks beneath the snow, trailing pink where snow froze my blood. A tree grew near where I thought I had fallen into this place, but there had been no tree then. I found my discarded parts along the way. I found bits of glass and the heavy bulk of my suit in a patch of red flowers where my umbilicals extended out from the roots of the tree. The carbonates had cracked in long, long neglect. Decades of sun and wind and rain had devastated these hardy, space–worthy fibers. I ran my hands along the fractured seams. Tiny worms had burrowed into the foams — planted tiny eggs. I wiped the larva off of my hands along the grassy ground.

I sniffed at the flowers. They smelled safe. I ate one. I waited a while, unsure how long it took for it to reach my stomach, even as I tried to count down the seconds. I ate another flower, and another. I chewed on the stems. I collected grass blades and ate those, too. I considered eating the worms, but I had never eaten insects before and I wasn’t sure if I could bring myself to it. I thought about the body in the hall, and wondered which would be first.

Probably bugs.

I sat in the shade of the tree. I held still and let the sun warm me. Light spilled on my face.

A sunset. A sunrise. I was warm, then cold, then warm again. I had no idea what to do next. Rescue seemed impossible if I had no comprehension of where I was or how I had gotten there. If I was lost, so too would be the ones searching for me.

Slow, quiet terror gnawed on me from the inside of my hunger and thirst.

§

No taller than my knees, four legs like a dog or a cat and the torso of a small babe with two arms; six limbs, like an insect made of flesh. It

walked around a corner, then, not seeing me with its wide, childlike eyes, it turned another corner and was gone.

I stood up. I walked toward the creature. I peered down the hall where the creature had gone. The grasses faded into sand. The walls were stones and bricks mortared together as if by limestone cements. I saw the strange, small creature. It had turned over a rock on the ground. It gathered up the insects there. Some it ate raw, silently, with no joy in its face. Some it shoved into a small, dirty pouch around its neck.

“Hello?” I said.

The creature turned to me. It looked me in the face with human eyes. It bolted down the hall, around a corner, and away.

“Hello?” I shouted.

It had crafted a pouch of some kind. It had made a tool and used it. I had never seen its like. I assumed it was an alien of some sort.

I went back to my tree. I sat under the tree again, thumping my fingers on the carapace of my ruined suit.

Birds were singing.

Curious, this strange way the seasons had turned. I followed my remembered trail to the cave. I was always, at heart, a scientist. I wanted to try again.

I went just inside the cave’s maw, where I could still see the light of the outside world. I returned to the world. Nothing of the warm sun and grass had changed. I stopped to eat more of the grass. It was better than handfuls of sand. Back into the darkness, I passed beyond the sight of light.

“Wait,” I said to no one. I sniffed the air.

No dead body.

I felt around the ground with my feet, shuffling into the cave, sniffing. I had expected the cave to remain the same.

I saw the ghostlight again, spilling up in a silent fountain from the ground. This remained, only and forever, in the center of the bush of mangled wooden limbs like discarded marionettes.

I stepped out to darkness, nightfall, and an inscrutable season neither warm nor cold. I looked up at the stars and could not place the map of them without the processors that were currently riddled with decay and worm eggs under the tree where I had arrived.

I picked my way down to where my suit was. I found a rotten stump. I found a stain of carbonates, cracked to dust and caked in a smear in the

sand. I sat on the stump and wept.

There was no rescue. There was no understanding. I was alone, and I could not reach a soul back on the station. After so many years in the maze, all the names and faces are behind a gauze, and to remember is like clutching butterflies with feathers. I had a life I knew, and friends, and I knew where I would wake up and sleep for every day of my life until I arrived in this strange place. I think my mother's name was Julie. This is why I named my daughter Julie: so I would never forget my mother's face, my mother's name. I wept until I did not have the strength to weep.

I would have died like this. But I didn't die. I had left a trail in the ground, familiar to the sort of person who knows how to read the footprints in the sand.

Saitan would find my footprints in the sand and follow them away from his own path to the cave until he found me.

I was one of the lucky newcomers. Nothing really bad had happened to me before I was found.

3: Saitan

I lay down with my head resting on the lost curve of a shoulder — the last recognizable piece of my suit that hadn't been infested with bugs or seeds. I closed my eyes and tried not to think about the ghostlights. When my eyes opened, it was light out. A man sat on a rock, ruddy brown skin and smiling with filthy teeth.

He said something I didn't understand.

I said, "Who are you?"

He said something else I couldn't place. He offered me something that looked like meat. He gestured for me to eat it. I did. He had a water skin, too. He drank from it. Then he offered it to me. He placed both hands upon his chest. "Saitan," he said

"I assume that's your name," I said. I tried it on my tongue, but broke the word. I drank from the waterskin. The water was foul and stained with the flavor of bitter leather. I couldn't get enough of it.

He repeated his name, pointing at himself, while I drank his water. He urged me to speak it. I tried until I got it right. Then, he pointed at me.

I pointed at myself. "Maia," I said. I pointed at him. "Saitan?"

He clapped once. He pulled a spear from the grass. He picked up a large stick with a stone strapped to the end like a hammer from beside the spear. He walked over to a strange bump of rock and poked at it. The stone was actually soft as mud. Then, the man pointed at a place where a small puddle of damp against the stones had been splattered a little, into something resembling an elephant–sized bird's foot, though much of the shape had dissipated.

He spoke. I shook my head. "I can't understand you," I said.

He pointed his spear to the cave. He wrapped strips of dry leaves around the stone on a stick. He lit the strips of leaves on fire. He gestured to me to follow him.

"Maia," he said.

I followed him into the ground. I held his hand in the dark. I had been afraid so long, I did not have the energy to be afraid of him.

§

I didn’t know this right away, but I learned it. Saitan pointed at the ground. A shape in the sand could have been footprints.

Saitan followed a monster into the cave. He followed the monster through the cave. He emerged behind the monster into a new season every time he emerged. First snow, then spring, then summer, then bitter autumn.

A simple enough path.

I followed him. He lit his torch. He led me down. He walked me past the strange bush with the ghostlights. He walked me around a corner, where the footsteps of the monster led him. We descended a while, maybe an hour. Then, the cave turned sharply up and we climbed up with it. We emerged in moments, in light.

It was as bitter cold as when I had first arrived, though it wasn’t snowy. I shivered. I frowned. The man pulled me close to him. He smiled. He spoke to me, though I did not know his words, and I was not afraid of him. He was not touching me meaningfully. He was just warming me up. He ran his hands up and down my arm and breathed his odorous breath upon the side of my head. He smacked at my arms, laughing heartily, and making jokes I couldn’t understand.

We walked a trail down from the cave, around a corner, and through long halls on the path of some creature with large, bird–like feet.

§

We passed a smear of blood that used to be a small bird, as big as a chicken.

Saitan stopped and cut at what remained of the bird.

We walked, he and I, a circle around the cave, then down the cave, witnessing this mystery of time.

We learned enough to speak together, though we didn’t know the right words.

We followed something large and dangerous. We followed it because he wanted to destroy it and bring its head to a young woman he loved, among his people, near the water.

Where are your people, Saitan?

Back that way, past a lake, and where the lake used to be. He showed me by running his fingers through a puddle, beyond the puddle, and by running his fingers around to show me where a puddle had been.

And a beautiful girl, with blonde hair — like mine, he runs his hands through my hair — and he doesn't want me to be alone. He will take me back with him when he finds his monster, kills it, and takes its head home.

He showed me the tracks when the weather was damp and the air was full of rain. *Look*, he said, *we're catching up to the monster.*

He spoke a language I had never heard. It resembled nothing to me. I could barely comprehend the basic phonemes.

Time folded into a mystery of days and nights and seasons changing in moments. How long was it like this, with Saitan?

Women have a clock inside them that measures out their days. It couldn't have been long, I thought. It couldn't have been long at all, even if it seemed long.

§

Monsters.

Mazes are full of monsters. The small dogmen, like malformed children, I've mentioned the minotaurs. Saitan ran one off and killed another with his spear. We ate its flesh raw and cooked and dried. I have seen the strange gargoyles turn to stone beneath my very eyes, moving only when no one can see them. I have hidden from trolls; I have dissected their corpses. I have run fingers through the thick, bitter sap that passes for their blood.

There was a time when there were no trolls in the maze, hunting men, I think, and a time when the trolls did not know we were even dangerous, or edible. Then, one day, there were trolls, roaming the halls alone and in packs. Are they natives here, or are they like us, far from home?

Cavemen wander the halls with clenched fists and biting animal maws. They throw stones and howl like monkeys. They live in caves along a cliff far from here, where our strong men patrol to beat them back when the cavemen wander from their halls too close to ours.

§

Seasons spent learning to speak to each other. Talking of how to reach his home, through this hall and that hall — he marked them with his spear, but the markings died. I had to remember the maps he carved into the rocks.

He brought me food. He asked nothing of me. I looked at him sleeping under the tree, in broad daylight. I wondered what would happen to me if he were to be killed by one of the monsters here.

People need each other. Saitan walked these halls to return to the woman he loved.

Without my daughter, Julie, I think I would have died.

§

In the cave, Saitan snuffed the torch out. He pressed into my arm. He pulled me close and wrapped his hand over my mouth to keep me from screaming. *Shh.…*

I heard the footfalls, steady as stones.

A flash in the dark — a moving shadow against ghostlight — and Saitan held me and hushed me.

Like a dead tree and a lizard and a man, it poked and prodded so carefully upon the bush of the ghostlight.

We watched it, Saitan and me, prodding the branches and the fountain of light like a gardener. Under the long, spindly fingers — talons? — of the monster, the bush seemed to expand a little and tremble with ecstasy.

We waited. It moved on, down and down the cave, beyond our light.

We waited longer.

Saitan let go. He ran his hand along my hair. He whispered something in my ear. *Don't fear.*

He gathered his weapons. He walked ahead into the room lit by ghostlight and the bush. He handed me the torch. (He made torches every spring from the branches of the tree and the skin of animals he hunted in

the spring. The tiny dogmen taste like rancid pork. The birds have been generally greasy and bland.)

I won't let it hurt you, he said to me. I don't know what he said, but I'm pretty sure that's what he said.

He pointed. He waved for me to follow him with the torchlight.

I followed him down.

We made another trip into the cave and out again. Winter, now. Bitter cold, and snow on the ground, piled up in heaps against the maze walls where the shadows mute the sunlight's passage through the sky. Saitan poured snow into his water skin. He was a native of this place, and he had a container for water, weapons, the knowledge of torches.

The tree was still there, all these times. Rising and falling, I wondered if it was the same tree or generations of a tree. I wondered but I had no laboratory tools or ways of making any here. I wish I could have climbed the tree, looked out over the stone walls, and seen the maze spread out before me. I wanted to get distance from the maze, to measure these hallways and twisting stone paths. Plants grew where they could, and there were none in deep winter, but naked stumps. If I tried to climb, Saitan stopped me. I was too afraid of the place to challenge his unspoken command. The best I could do to measure anything was take Saitan's spear and grind a notch in the tree. We came around again — autumn — and the notch was gone. I never saw any sign of Saitan's cuttings for his torches.

Saitan cut again and again into the dirty bricks, marking the path to take to his village to teach me the way.

I ran my finger over sand to repeat what I had learned. I touched the walls before he could carve into them.

I learned as best I could.

§

The monster never bent its skull around to us. It did not reach a claw out to slice our necks.

Not yet.

4: Monster

Saitan waited to be certain of a killing blow. He couldn't take chances with such a deadly creature, with such terrible claws, and me beside him.

I was frightened of it. I was holding my breath. I was afraid to raise my arm to stop Saitan when he moved away from me. He lurked around in the darkness with the brickbat in his hand. He sought his opening to attack, there at the edge of light.

He found none. The monster dissipated into darkness after the gardening was done.

§

Julie, my daughter, I taught her of blood, because I thought it was how to understand what it meant — what the underground meant — about our world and our place inside of it.

It was my hypothesis, though I could not truly test it with my current facilities, if I could even remember how to use any real tools by now.

I did the best I could to teach Julie, though. I placed a piece of bread — a small piece — in a basket where no insects or mice could reach it. I placed an equally small piece in a different basket. I showed Julie. I took blood from a bird and poured it onto just one of the bits of bread — but only a little, just enough to put a spot of blood on the bread.

"Tell me, Julie," I said, "which one of these pieces of bread will be the first to grow mold."

"They both will, if you don't eat them," she said. She was clapping her hands after an insect. She was listening to me, but she was chasing an insect.

"Don't eat either one, Julie. I'm teaching you about blood and about the things you cannot see inside of blood. Why you must wash yourself if you are dirty with strange things."

"They'll both grow mold."

"They will? Which one will grow the mold faster?"

"They both will together."

“Well, leave the bread here and we’ll check it tomorrow morning, and every morning, and see which one is moldier.”

“It’s a waste of bread. Enyo Gyoja won’t like it. Geraldine will yell.”

“Enyo Gyoja has forgotten more things than we could possibly do to anger him, and Geraldine won’t yell as long as we don’t tell her anything.”

The blood, of course, sprouted fungal blooms and wriggling maggots. The other was merely stale.

“Julie, don’t forget to wash yourself if there is blood. Boil water before drinking it. Rinse your hands before eating.”

“Please, Julie, listen to your mother. I know other people do things differently, but they aren’t like us.”

“That’s right, beautiful one, it is because we are scientists. We study the natural world, and prove things empirically. We don’t just believe anything, like the children throwing vulture feathers into fire.”

Moldy bread, with every cavity of yeast inside a cell for the pupae of plant and animal: fungus and worm. This is the maze, to me. And the blood of the maze? Julie?

Julie isn’t listening to me anymore. She’s gone off to play with the other children.

§

We were in the snow. The tree had dwindled down to a sapling, whether from old age or winding back from age, I do not know. We couldn’t pluck from its branches, for it had so few branches. I don’t know how trees grow here, and I cannot assume.

I longed for the comforts of the station. My body ached with the maze life’s endless travel to no destination. Space was so inhospitable to life that traveling there meant the careful engineering of paradise.

Here, Saitan smiled patiently. He held my hand while I picked my way around a stone.

Will you hurry, Saitan? Will you finish your task and take me where I may rest a while?

A little farther, he said. He held my hand and smiled. I didn’t want to return to his village. I wanted to stay here forever, just behind the monster.

For in its wake, we were safer than if we settled in its path.

Saitan said the village was in its path.

We can't live like this forever. I can't.

Saitan didn't hear me. He looked up at the muted sunlight past the clouds and caught snowflakes in his open palm. It looked like a ghostlight. It melted into his vinyl palms.

He led me back to the cave.

We saw the beast — it ignored us — climbing the rocks toward the cave. It didn't walk up a trail, like us. It latched its claws onto the stones and climbed directly up to the gap in the wall.

Saitan considered the cliff like he was going to try jumping it. He shook his head to himself. Then he led me on, again, out of the cold, into the darkness, then, into the comforts of autumn.

When will you kill it, Saitan?

When I know I can kill it.

How do you know if you can kill it?

When it is alone, its back is to us, and it is making enough noise to hide my approach.

(He turned his back to me, waved his arms around, and crumpled his bare feet in the gravel. That is how he spoke to me.)

Do it faster, Saitan.

(This is how I speak to him: I threw up at his feet. I was sick. I was getting worse. Every day I puked. My head ached all the time. I was exhausted all the time. My body felt all wrong — all wrong.)

Oh, Maia, I'm so sorry. I had no idea. Let us rest a while, in the summer.

No, kill your monster and take me to your village where I can rest a while, in all seasons, and I'm not walking all the time, day and night afraid of all these mysteries.

He nodded. He ran his hands through my hair. He kissed my forehead. I let him kiss me, there.

§

We entered the cavern. Saitan did not light our torch this time. We climbed into the darkness. Our eyes adjusted to the ghostlight glow.

The monster was there, a jagged silhouette against the bush of fountain light. It tore apart the bushes, now — resorting them? — into geometric shapes I didn't understand. The lights splattered up like a fountain, pulsing in the adjustments like pain. The air hummed with the pain of the adjustment

The monster stuck a hand into the glow to pluck out a single ghostlight. It held it in its palm like a fresh egg. I almost expected the monster to pull it close and rock it like a doll, the way it moved so carefully with the fragile light.

Saitan placed me in a spot, deliberately, with his hands on my hips to move me there, and planted me still as a tree.

Saitan handed me his spear and his empty torch. He peeled his stony hammer from his back without a sound. He took a deep breath — jumped. He struck with an animal howl.

The monster took the blow to the head. It bent over forward, throwing the tiny light up into the darkness and away. The monster crawled a little. It turned its head to its destroyer.

Saitan swung again.

Was it a monster, Saitan? Was it a killer of men? It looked pathetic, crawling on the ground.

Saitan sweated like rain. The adrenaline glow poured from his back, making him glisten in the ghostlight. He lifted the stone hammer again. He smashed it again. Saitan lifted the brickbat again, victorious.

My hand hurt. I held the spear tightly enough to hurt my hand.

The monster fell. It touched the bush. It pulled upon the geometric shapes.

The strange bush moved, not the beast: hands upon hands and legs upon legs, rising up, spindly, spider–style. The ghostlight streamed from it like a rocket flare.

Saitan stepped backward, the brickbat in front of him.

The bush stood on dozens of legs. Saitan swung his brickbat, but it was torn away by dozens of hands. Then, his arm was bleeding.

Saitan ran toward me, keening.

I was a tree.

The bush, with its fountain of light, stepped forward and raised a wall of talons.

I held so still.

Saitan ripped the spear from my hands. He pushed me back, back, back. He was shouting something. He was swinging the spear, jumping and dodging around the cavern, and the bush after him.

Please… A light in the darkness, a voice shouting from light, from all ghostlight. *Please, help me…*

"How can we help you?" I said.

Saitan was bleeding. His hands were covered in blood. The bush — the light — circled him.

Put–me–in–your–lung–put–me–in–your–lung–put–me–in–your–lung…

"But you're so big, and my lungs are so small."

Saitan was pulling on my arm, but he wasn't strong enough to pull me. He fell to one knee. He was weeping, I could see that he was bleeding all over his chest and stomach. I thought an entrail had fallen loose, whipping around like an umbilical cord.

"Can you help us?"

Please–help–me–please–help–me–please–help–me…

"I want to. But, you have to help us. My friend is hurt. He's going to die. He wants to help you."

Saitan couldn't scream. His blood was all over me. I was still. I was a tree. I was in shock. I was in a dream. I thought how I was going to have to wash the blood off before it caused an infection.

The bush collapsed into shards of glass. The fountain of light fell upon Saitan. His skin boiled with lesions and explosions and he screamed. His hand let go of mine. I backed away.

Then, Saitan divided like a cell. There were two Saitans: one dead, one living.

The light had fallen into Saitan, and his eyes were light.

The new Saitan picked up something from the fallen bits of bush. (A cape to cover his nakedness?) He did not notice me.

I poked the new Saitan with the butt of the spear.

"Are you… are you all right?"

Saitan cut at his own corpse, peeling meat from bones with fingernails, eating meat raw. He ignored me.

I looked closer. Instead of Saitan's black, curling hair, this Saitan had leaf buds along his head and spine — green, green. This Saitan had feet like the base of a tree — like the monster we had killed. They looked like wooden hooves.

I backed up. I backed up and backed up until I was in darkness.

The creature of light, broken free of the bush, bent down over the broken monster and touched its head with light. It, too, divided in twain. One devoured the other far faster than Saitan ever could. But, this monster was not a frightening thing. It stood up and stretched. It turned its eyes to me. I curled into a fetal ball.

The monster walked with its huge tree legs over the ground, grinding the gravel into the stones. It bent down over me with the groan of trees in wind.

It placed a hand upon my head, gently. I looked up into his eyes. He lifted me up in his arms and carried me down into the deep, deep darkness.

Once there, he placed a hand upon my stomach, gently. I looked down.

A light shone there, where I had never noticed before because of Saitan's fires.

I was pregnant.

With the creature in front of me, leading me out and turning his head to make sure I was still with him, I walked out of the darkness. The creature built a fire from the cast away wooden bones of the wooden body that Saitan had destroyed. I did not see the source of the spark. It could build fires. Listen, trolls know how to build fires. Do monstrous things know that?

I saw Saitan's mangled corpse, there.

I saw myself, collapsed into exhaustion, not far from the corpse.

The monster picked up my collapsed other self. It carried her limp body while I watched. It placed her near the fire.

And the light in the air that called to me… *Put–me–in–your–lung…*

"I will help you," I said. I knew exactly what to do, but I couldn't say exactly how I knew.

I plucked the ghostlight from the air. I cupped it in my palms like a dandelion seed. I held it over my prone, broken, unconscious body.

I believed, right then, that this was the only way to save my life from these monsters. I placed the light onto my skin. I watched it fall into my womb. It had wanted a lung, but what did these monsters know of human anatomy?

Then the monster left me there, without a word.

I pulled the meat from dead Saitan's pack. I listened closely for the sound of the satyr Saitan's wooden hooves clomping like sandals on the

rocks. I was afraid of him, wherever he was.

I melted snow. I touched my face and wondered what I should say, this time.

When she woke up, I did not smile or caress her cheek. I said, to her, “You’re doomed. You’re doomed. It’s better for you if you just starve to death here.”

That’s all I said.

I left her some of Saitan’s meat, but barely enough to last a day. I did not listen to her questions. I did not show her my stomach.

Because I am a scientist. Because I must doubt. Because I must test.

5: End

I suspect, Julie, that you are Saitan's daughter, somewhere in the maze.

Here, you are the child of light, placed not inside a lung, but in a womb. Your light kept me safe when Saitan died.

I walked the maze a long time, carrying you inside of me. I had to try to remember the way that Saitan had shown me. I failed. I followed the circling of birds, because I believed that birds would know where things were safe, and where things could be eaten. I climbed walls to see the sky and watch for birds.

I ran from minotaurs. I ran from gargoyles. I ran and I ran. My feet bled in the path behind me until they hardened. I ate roots and gravel and sucked dew off shady rocks.

I found a harpy, wounded and flying alone, a small creature with the face of a woman and the body of a bird. I beat the wounded creature with a rock until it died. I ate it raw, face and breast and all. It made me sick unto the edge of death.

When Ascalon and Joseph found me, they were patrolling a long trail to protect the village and hunt for meat. They clapped their hands at me and spoke kind words. They took me back to their village where no one knew my language, or believed me when I told them I had come from a station in the sky. Maia Station became my name.

I never told anyone about Saitan. I never left the village again.

I know what's out there, among the stone halls. I know what is under the earth. Now, I just want to rest, with you, my daughter. I can abide here as long as I have you.

§

How horrible it was, to see Saitan there. I wanted to scream when I saw him. I knew him right away. He was unmistakable, even if he was young enough to be my child. I said his name, and he looked up and I pretended it was a happy accident that a word I knew was also that little one's name.

Saitan played with the other little ones, and stole his grandmother's idols for toys. Aia waddled after her boy, screaming at his back. And he

ran, and he laughed, and he lived and lived.

Travelers, all of us, hurtling through time in a machine of bone and skin. Blood is our time; time is our blood.

§

Once, when he was a young boy, Saitan and his friend, the bastard caveman child, brought me a dead stone cow. They thought it would make me laugh, because everyone laughed at it. The stone cow had fallen in a heap of rock after the herd had been turned back, and the boys had claimed the best part. They couldn't bring all of it, only pieces. It was the skull and the neck. Saitan, a boy barely older than my own daughter, placed his hand into the mouth of the cow. He pushed it through until it jutted from the neck, and his hand aged a hundred years. It was wrinkled and hoary and horrible. He wiggled his fingers and pulled them back through, and his hand returned to youth.

Time is blood; blood is time.

§

There are bacteria all through our bodies we aren't even aware of. Sometimes our blood cells push them back. Sometimes the bacteria outlive us and flourish upon our desiccating bones, and generations of the bacteria pass from generation to generation and smear all over everything we touch or taste.

I don't think the bacteria inside of me, or the tiny little cells of my blood, know why they do what they do, or what happened to the colonies lost in the catastrophe when my daughter was born, or what will happen when I fall into age and fall still.

My daughter's name is Julie Station.

I touch her hair and wonder what evil I have wrought.

Leukocytes infect infections. Bacteria never know.

My beautiful cuckoo is more important to me than my own life. I want her to continue to live. I want her to have a long time and to have

daughters of her own.

If the light ever finds me again, I know I will do whatever it wants.

I will give my daughter anything she wants.

§

The satyr Saitan is out there, roaming the tesseracts of the maze, growing old — perhaps very old, like a tree, with leaves growing from his head and wooden hooves.

My daughter dances in the winter. She wears the vulture feathers. She cackles and crows and laughs. She sings the vulture songs with the other children. She circles the flame. She throws her feathers into the fire. We cheer for her.

You're so beautiful.

I'll never tell a soul about you, Julie.

I'll speak so softly, you'll never wake up from your dreams, beautiful one.

[End Excerpt]

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“Ariadne”

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